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The Shrinking Humanitarian Space and Declining Security of
Humanitarian Aid Workers in Modern Conflicts
Gaza as a case study

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Abstract

The safety of humanitarian aid workers has deteriorated significantly in contemporary armed conflicts despite the protections afforded under international humanitarian law. This thesis examines why humanitarian personnel are increasingly exposed to violence by addressing the research question: *Why is the safety of humanitarian aid workers declining in modern conflicts?* Using the situation in Gaza as an illustrative case study, the research explores structural, political and operational factors contributing to this trend.

The thesis employs a qualitative case study methodology based on document analysis of academic literature, reports from humanitarian organizations, United Nations publications and legal sources. The analysis examines developments affecting humanitarian action, inducing shrinking humanitarian space, restrictions on humanitarian access, politicization of aid, declining respect for international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles, cuts in funding for humanitarian assistance, and the targeted diffusion of disinformation and misinformation.

The findings demonstrate that the declining of safety for humanitarian aid workers is not based on a single cause, but is due to an array of interconnected variables. In Gaza, humanitarian access has become increasingly restricted, as humanitarian assistance has become entangled in military and political objectives. Humanitarian organizations are facing operational and security challenges in an area impacted by weakened accountability. The thesis concludes that reversing this trend requires commitment to humanitarian principles, stronger protection of humanitarian access, greater accountability for violations of international humanitarian law, sustainable funding and fuel narratives promoting trust in humanitarian organizations.

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Introduction

Today, there are many emerging conflicts and an increasing number of civilians targeted in warfare, suffering from a lack of basic human rights within conflict zones. In this context, the need for humanitarian assistance is more imminent than ever, but the circumstances and workings of the aid delivery system is in crisis.

The central research question of this thesis is:

Why is the safety of humanitarian aid workers declining in modern conflicts?

To explore this question, Gaza is used as a case study, as it provides an urgent and relevant example of the growing risks faced by humanitarian aid workers in operations in contemporary war zones.

Research objective

The object of this thesis is to examine the factors that contribute to the declining safety of humanitarian aid workers in modern conflict. By connecting theoretical perspectives on humanitarian space and humanitarian action, the focus will be on the role of humanitarian aid workers, which in this thesis includes both international and local aid workers from all humanitarian organizations. An empirical analysis will be conducted of the conditions under which humanitarian operations are carried out. The thesis will in particular investigate how changes in political structures, conflict dynamics and respect for international humanitarian law, decency and rights affect the ability of humanitarian aid workers to safely operate in areas of conflict.

To address this objective, the thesis combines existing theory and literature with an analysis of the historical developments of violence and insecurities in humanitarian settings. As a case study, Gaza provides groundwork for closer analysis of these developments and will explore how humanitarian aid workers are exposed to risk in one of the world's most volatile conflict environments. By using Gaza as an empirical example, the thesis seeks to identify broader patterns and mechanisms that can help explain the deteriorating security for humanitarian personnel in other areas of conflict as well.

Furthermore, the thesis explores how wider geopolitical developments may be contributing to the decline of safety with an international system moving towards a more polarized world order, characterized by a weakening respect for humanitarian principles. Questions about humanitarian organizations' neutrality will be addressed as well as the development of humanitarian space which is increasingly shaped by military strategies, shifting power relations and contested interpretations of legitimacy, protection and neutrality.

The suffering of civilian populations is the center of humanitarian concern, while the safety of humanitarian aid workers themselves is a less addressed, but an increasingly relevant issue. Humanitarian aid workers have the responsibility to provide protection, medical care, shelter, food assistance and other essential, life-saving services in environments suffering from insecurity, violence and institutional collapse. However, they can only carry out this work effectively if they are afforded a minimum level of safety and protection. The vulnerability of humanitarian personnel is a central condition for the delivery of humanitarian assistance. When aid workers are injured, kidnapped, threatened or killed, humanitarian operations are disrupted, which has major consequences for the continuing operation and the capacity to respond to human suffering is weakened. For this reason, understanding the causes behind the declining safety of humanitarian aid workers is not only important to the aid workers themselves, but ultimately for the aid recipients and the functioning and future of humanitarian action.

Scope and literature review

The thesis focuses on the declining safety of humanitarian aid workers in contemporary armed conflict, using Gaza as a case study. Gaza is a relevant case as it reflects several of the conditions that increasingly shape humanitarian operations today; severe restriction to access, high-intensity violence, contested political narratives and frequent attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. The case is used to find generalizable variables explaining the decrease of safety faced by humanitarian aid workers.

The scope of the thesis is analytical rather than statistical as it does not intend to map worldwide incidents involving humanitarian personnel but rather investigate development and conditions that has made humanitarian work more dangerous. Gaza is then used as a focused empirical example. By limiting the study to one case while leaning on literature to expand the scope of the research question, the thesis seeks to contribute to the discussion of how and why humanitarian aid workers are facing greater insecurity and lack of protection in contemporary conflicts.

The literature reviewed in this thesis primarily draws on research on humanitarian space, humanitarian access and violence against aid workers. It also engages with academia on the polarization of humanitarian action, methods of negative campaigning and spreading of mistrust, and the weakening respect for international humanitarian law. Together, this literature helps explain how humanitarian aid workers have become increasingly vulnerable in conflict settings and

provides framework for analyzing the case of Gaza. There are existing literature and research conducted around multiple dilemmas faced by humanitarian aid workers, including their lack of access, the increasingly lack of respect for international humanitarian law, and difficulties around being an ideal neutral aid worker. This thesis will not merely look at the statistics and data of the humanitarian aid worker's killings, disappearances and conflicting sides' lack of respect for them, it will look at why and how the safety for the humanitarian aid workers have changed.

This thesis will first display an overview of the theoretical foundation of humanitarian space, action, and limitations before moving to the case study. A general overview of the need for aid and the development in the humanitarian space in areas of the Middle East will be introduced before scoping in on Gaza. The method of choice is explained, before the part of analysis and discussion. The part of analysis and discussion portrays the different trends in historical development of aid in Gaza and the evolution of the shrinking humanitarian space.

Method

The chosen method for analyzing the research question of this thesis seemed to be a qualitative content study. Mere numbers or facts that could have been analyzed in a quantitative study tell us little about the causes and consequences behind the fatalities of humanitarian aid workers. The understanding of variables, causes and the actions and people behind the numbers, and subsequently the consequences for the people in need, is what started my interest in this topic to begin with. Using secondary data and theoretical argumentation was thus a good option for this thesis.

I decided to use an illustrative case study, with the case of Gaza. Conducting an illustrating case study with one area of conflict makes it possible to properly present different theories within the topic of decreasing security for humanitarian aid workers in a shrinking humanitarian space. To illustrate and try to find generalizable theories as to why this is happening, choosing one territory as a case study can further elaborate and put the theories and empirics into life. Gaza was a sensible choice of area as case, as it has a long history of problems and evolution within the topic to draw lines from. It has also become one of the decidedly most dangerous places to operate in as a humanitarian aid worker.

The combination of secondary data with theoretical argumentation and presenting different legislation, provides a framework to further make arguments on the basis from. Furthermore, examining existing literature and connect the two parts in an analyze of Gaza, makes the variables

context-based and easier to analyze. In the section of discussion, the frameworks and literature are brought together in a logic and constructive way to try and make generalizable observations to answer the posed research question. The only use of AI in the generation of this thesis has been to ask ChatGPT to provide a framework for an abstract and conclusion of the thesis.

1. Theoretical and legal foundation

Humanitarian aid workers are essential personnel in the dangerous and essential task of upholding international humanitarian law and thus saving innocent lives in times of armed conflict. An increasing problem with this important task is how the humanitarian aid workers can perform their duties when the basic human rights and humanitarian principles are not procedurally followed or respected to ensure the safety of the aid workers themselves. They are operating within tense, stressed, desperate and life-threatening situations, where all their focus should be on assisting people in need within the area of conflict. Instead, they are now facing an increased fear for their own lives, as a trend of targeting humanitarian aid workers in their areas of operation is rising.

As DeBois and Healy explain according to Slim, the focus of humanitarian work should be on the “life-saving” factor and “life-keeping” needs, not the “life-making” needs with merely beneficial factors to life. Conceptualized, humanitarian needs beyond the biological factors, are boiled down to the categories of survival capability, social need and systems need (DeBois & Healy, 2024, p 101). With Slim’s conceptualization in mind – how can humanitarian aid workers create an environment of life-keeping and -saving when they themselves are at the bottom of the categories of both survival capability and desperate system needs?

This chapter presents the theoretical and legal foundation underpinning the thesis. It examines key legal frameworks and theoretical perspectives related to humanitarian action, humanitarian space, impartial humanitarian assistance, restrictions on humanitarian access, and the security for humanitarian aid workers. These frameworks provide the legal and conceptual basis for the analysis and establishes the foundation on which the case of Gaza is interpreted and examined. Hence, this chapter serves as essential groundwork, clarifying central concepts and enable connections to be drawn between the legal and theoretical framework, along with the empirical case of Gaza presented in the following chapter. By analyzing variables that contribute to the decline of safety for humanitarian aid workers, the thesis ultimately seeks to answer the central research question.

1.1 Humanitarian action

Humanitarian action is one of the most important tools to help people in need all over the world. The objectives of humanitarian action are to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain human dignity during crises such as natural disasters or man-made armed conflicts. In this thesis I will focus on humanitarian action and humanitarian aid workers operating within armed conflict. It is essential within humanitarian action to protect the people who are no longer taking part in conflicts, as well as civilians. The provision and delivery of life-saving resources of assistance like water, food, shelter, sanitation, and health services falls under the scope of humanitarian action (Good Humanitarian Donorship, 2003).

Humanitarian action are based on four fundamental principles all humanitarian action is based on. These are rooted in international humanitarian law and have been embraced by UN General Assembly Resolutions. The principles are also emphasized in key documents such as the Code of Conduct for the ICRC and NGOs of Disaster Relief and are thus the basis for all parts of humanitarian action. The four principles are: Humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025). States have a responsibility to protect and assist people within their territory who are affected by armed conflicts, disasters and violence. Humanitarian action is meant to support and complement states in their responsibilities. 1) Humanity is the primary driver. Saving lives, restoring dignity and minimizing suffering when responding to a crisis are key factors. 2) Impartiality confirms the humanitarian actors' commitment to provide help solely based on, and prioritized by, need rather than socio-economic factors. 3) Neutrality makes sure the humanitarian actors do not engage in choosing any side of the conflict or take part in political, ideological, religious or racial bias. 4) Independence is the last core principle, which ensures humanitarian actors act autonomously; without outside influence or risk of becoming subjects of any kind of control from non-humanitarian objectives (UNHCR, 2025).

Within humanitarian organizations and agencies responding to humanitarian needs, there is a variety of important jobs and tasks. The most dangerous and important jobs are conducted in the field, on the scene of conflict. Elements of risks have always existed within the field of serving in conflict zones, but the world has changed. Humanitarian aid workers cannot conduct their work in the same way as before, as the situation has deteriorated regarding the safety and scope of operation for humanitarian relief personnel. According to a platform researching and reporting on the humanitarian landscape; "Humanitarian Action" (2026), this is due to the shrinking humanitarian space, the decrease of security in areas of crisis, and lastly the safety for humanitarian aid workers

themselves in the complex situation of an armed conflict. The aid workers have been given an increasingly complicated task to defend and uphold international humanitarian law, protect civilians, act collectively and work restlessly to save lives and help people across the world. In the areas in need, there has been an increasing trend of authorities, governments or military groups not allowing aid to flow freely across the borders to meet the needs on the ground, in the contested areas (Humanitarian Action, 2026).

The official Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and -Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief clearly states in its first paragraphs that the right to receive humanitarian aid is a fundamental humanitarian principle that all citizens can enjoy, regardless of factors like nationality and religion. Receiving aid should solely be based on proportionality; the degree of suffering, should be assessed, and the people most in need of aid should be prioritized. The Code of Conduct also strictly explains how aid cannot be used to promote religious or political standpoints. Aid can also not in any ways be used as instruments of a government's foreign policy in any way, gathering information of economically, military or politically sensitive nature (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 1994, p 3). This is specifically relevant for the case where organizations and NGOs are receiving funds from Foreign Ministries or political entities such as USAID or EU.

All humanitarian personnel involved in civilian relief are not only required to help, but they are also protected. Article 71 in Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions, which is applicable in international armed conflict, is one of the concrete articles in international legislation concerning this:

- (1) Where necessary, relief personnel may form part of the assistance provided in any relief action, in particular for the transportation and distribution of relief consignments; the participation of such personnel shall be subject to the approval of the Party in whose territory they will carry out their duties. (*Protocol I*, 1977, art. 71(1))
- (2) Such personnel shall be respected and protected. (*Protocol I*, 1977, art. 71(2))

Humanitarian action is thus not only a responsibility, but a universally recognized and protected responsibility as all the states in the world have signed and ratified the Geneva Conventions and are thus bound to act accordingly. However, Israel have not ratified the Additional Protocol (International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.).

1.2 Humanitarian space

“Humanitarian space” is a discussed and contested term which remains poorly understood and defined after decades of use. It is argued that the origin of the concept was born during the Cold War by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). They used it to characterize the broad operating environment where humanitarian actors were working within; a space where belligerent parties and aid agencies could participate in humanitarian dialogues. The concept further developed and got foothold during the 1990s when President Brauman of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) explained the concept of humanitarian space as a free space to monitor delivery and use of support and assistance. It is a necessity to be free to evaluate needs and to have free dialogues with actors and people. The concept of neutrality became a part of the term, describing a space free from political influence, highlighting independent humanitarian action. During the beginning of the 2000s, the apolitical space was further clarified by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). In the humanitarian space, actors must adhere to principles of impartiality, neutrality and uphold and understand their role in the clear distinction between military and political actions versus their functions and roles of relieving suffering and saving lives within the space (Collinson & Elhawary, p 1, 2012).

When discussing the sphere of aid influence in geopolitical situations, the concept of humanitarian space is used. Humanitarian space can be operationalized in multiple ways, but the main identifying factors include the creation of, and maintenance of a space where humanitarian agencies can effectively perform their tasks. The tasks of humanitarian action are thus primarily assisting those in need of aid while maintaining neutrality and impartiality (Egeland, 2004, p 130). Human rights references in a global space, in the realm of an international community are better understood within the humanitarian space as it is crucial to the aid organizations, serving as a zone permitting delivery of assistance (Feldman, 2009, p 32).

The concept of humanitarian space is further defined by several essential characteristics, identified by Jan Egeland, former United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator and current General Secretary of the Norwegian Refugee Council. Egeland conceptualizes humanitarian space as an environment where humanitarian action is conducted solely on the basis of need, ensuring the assistance reaches the those needing it the most, regardless of political, military or other conditions (Egeland, 2004, p 130). He further identifies two key security threats to humanitarian space: obstructing humanitarian access, which undermine the

delivery of assistance and the protection of civilians, and the resulting deterioration of security for humanitarian aid workers (Egeland, 2004, p 36).

Humanitarian space is supposed to be a safe space for everyone, especially to the most vulnerable people who are victims by all sides of the conflict. They need help and resources without bias or discrimination to receive purely life-saving humanitarian aid (Brubaker, Bennett & Eriksen, 2024, p 1097). Vulnerable people in conflict zones need aid and protection by humanitarian institutions, which are parts of the reason why the neutral organization International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the United Nations (UN) were founded, and why humanitarian space is needed (Hansen, 2004, p 149). Peter Hansen mentioned already in 2004, that the presumption of humanitarian action was challenged “in recent years”, as the perception of the so-called neutral humanitarian actors had evolved to the assumption they had become deeply involved in the bias of the political sphere. Hansen argued this was a grave cause of concern as the humanitarian space could be on the brink of collapsing, creating dangerous situations if it becomes purposefully compromised by political influence. Delivery of aid and support in a safe space to the populations most affected by the conflict, without the influence of political factors should be the bare minimum. “IHL encourages the belligerent parties to create humanitarian spaces that protect victims of war” (Droege, 2024, p 999). Aid agencies both understand the importance of humanitarian space for their effective operations, and actors are increasingly understanding the limitations of space (Hansen, 2004, p 147).

The attacks on the 11th of September 2001 changed the international world order. The geopolitical situation experienced a drastic shift, which made this event a timestamp which other events or trends are measured up against. Humanitarian actors have discussed the contracting humanitarian space for decades, but there was a definite consensus amongst humanitarian actors that their ability to provide protection and relief to affected populations in need, has dramatically declined since the attacks on 9/11. The humanitarian aid provided by Western authorities to further security and political objectives have especially inflicted the developments (Collinson & Elhawary, p 1, 2012). A trend emerged after 9/11. Western governments started to expand the notion of humanitarian aid to impose ideas and not only include support and stabilization of areas in crisis. The lines between the humanitarian and political spheres were consequently blurred, which have made the areas of operation increasingly dangerous for humanitarian agencies (Collinson & Elhawary, p 9, 2012).

In the decade following the tragic attacks on the 11th of September 2001, the pursuit of coherence amongst the UN and donors reshaped the humanitarian space debate. A number of agencies working against “humanitarian wars” were outraged when the increasing politization of aid were explicitly used to stabilize activities. These agencies have argued that a consequence of this notion has been a decrease in security for humanitarian aid workers operating in a space marked by limited humanitarian access to the populations in need. In 2008, the image of humanitarianism facing an existential crisis was further fuelled by the increasing violence against humanitarian aid workers increased, respectively in Afghanistan 2004 and Iraq 2007 as drivers of this notion. With coherence being rejected, the independence of humanitarian action was reassessed. The stabilization efforts of donors backlashed, when agencies began arguing with “comprehensive approaches”; separating humanitarian aid and military action as there would be no room for humanitarianism. The distinction between military and civilian actors in the profusion of civil-military guidelines, stressed that collaborations between the two sectors only as a last resort could be countenanced (Collinson & Elhawary, p 15-16, 2012).

Another challenge is when humanitarian space is not ruled exclusively by independent organizations, but includes UN peacekeeping operations, groups hostile to the peace process can consider any part claiming to be humanitarian as a potential enemy. The UN can include operations that influence the hostile groups negatively, with combat action or other influences and clear statements, which makes every actor working within the humanitarian space a danger, a potential enemy and thus another target (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 15). “We must be careful to preserve the humanitarian space and the neutrality and impartiality it requires, and that often means advocating for ceasefires to allow for the delivery of humanitarian aid” (Demeyere & Rafferty, 2024, p 1020). Factors within the humanitarian space are thus dependent on not only the humanitarian aid workers and other actors operating within the area but also the authorities, military and others with a non-humanitarian position.

Humanitarian actors and non-humanitarian actors both need to understand their important roles within the humanitarian space to create a safe environment of action. More difficult is the need for combatants to respect the humanitarian principles. If they are not respecting the actors or principles, the humanitarian space cedes to exist. Broad acceptance and respect for civilian lives and the notion of humanitarianism need to exist for humanitarian space to be complete (Egeland, 2004, p 130). By definition, humanitarian space is corresponding with respect for international humanitarian law. Actions conducted by warring parties within the humanitarian space must thus comply with their

responsibilities to uphold the law. Allowing impartial humanitarian organizations to provide protection and aid to civilians and help meet humanitarian needs are amongst these responsibilities (Collinson & Elhawary, p 1, 2012). In today's geopolitical climate with dilemmas regarding lack of respect and commitment to international humanitarian law and human rights in general, this factor is a reason why many in modern society talk about an incomplete, a shrinking, humanitarian space.

1.3 Impartial aid work

As observed from standards in international law and guidelines for NGOs and other humanitarian actors, the principles of impartiality and neutrality are key for humanitarian action. The separation from politics at the practical level, to keep the humanitarian aid work impartial, is deemed necessary to gain access to the areas and populations in need, as well as ensure protection and safety for humanitarian aid workers. The task of humanitarian personnel is to respond to the symptoms of the crisis, not to deal with the causes. When humanitarian personnel abide to the principles of impartiality, neutrality, independence and non-interference, the belligerent parties in a conflict are more inclined to allow them into areas of operation. This is the implicit "deal" in conflicts; when actors help all parties to the conflict equally, they are granted access and operational freedom (Collinson & Elhawary, p 3, 2012). The Geneva Conventions, Resolutions by the United Nations General Assembly and international humanitarian law all require humanitarian missions and their mandate to be impartial and exclusively humanitarian (DeBois & Healy, 2024, p 94).

As the Red Cross Review points out, the main factors of being a humanitarian aid worker rely on the principle of impartiality and a commitment to humanitarian principles and standards (DeBois & Healy, 2024, p 94). National staff from one of the belligerent parties in a conflict zone, are usually avoided to be sent into the field by international humanitarian organizations. They can both be in a situation of risk and weaken their independent organizations' status as neutral and impartial. Staff from the "outside" inserting themselves in the area of conflict, often appear more neutral (Mackintosh, 2007, p 119). However, many humanitarian aid workers feel as if impartiality and independence are not fully possible anymore. Impartiality, as a moral imperative, should not simply be a concept to check off your list, as it can undermine the implementation; it should be treated as part of the goal of the operation (DeBois & Healy, 2024, p 108).

There are different ways of operationalizing the concept of humanitarian assistance, and within the non-governmental sector the personnel of NGOs express strong opinions about the actor itself. If a state is providing humanitarian relief, particularly if the state has any kind of strategic or military

interest in the area in need, the assistance cannot be purely humanitarian. Their opinion clearly states that a broad definition or application of the term can undermine the respect and protection meant for humanitarian work. The term should thus be reserved for NGOs of neutral and independent nature (Mackintosh, 2007, p 125).

UN operations within areas of armed conflict include everything from delivering political, development or humanitarian assistance within peace building missions, emergency humanitarian aid operations, development missions, or missions to restore or maintain international security and peace. These are important missions, but the UN can potentially hurt operations in collaboration with humanitarian organizations. The association with the UN can hurt the image of independent and neutral humanitarian action, as the UN is a political body as well. In some cases, they have even played a primary political or military role rather than acting strictly humanitarian. This is a primary reason why ICRC did not want to be protected under the Optional Protocol to the Convention; “because the application of the Convention to the ICRC would necessarily imply fairly close association between it and the United Nations” (Mackintosh, 2007, p 124).

Delivering impartial aid in a field of armed conflict is especially dangerous when the parties to the conflict perceive the presence of foreign actors as threatening to themselves and beneficial for the enemy’s side and interests. Humanitarian space and the safety of humanitarian aid workers is then contingent on what the MSF-foundation call the credibility of the humanitarian symbol within the area of operation. This “humanitarian symbol” expresses: “We refuse to take sides in this war. Our only goal is to provide aid to its victims” (Weissman, 2004, p 1). The clarity of this symbol is according to MSF, the only protection humanitarian actors have; thus, their position must reflect the transparency of their intentions. This is vital to avoid causing deadly confusions between political-military institutions and humanitarian organizations, which is what happened for example in Afghanistan in 2004 when five MSF-staff members were murdered (Weissman, 2004, p 1).

1.4 Limited access to humanitarian aid

The provision of life-saving humanitarian assistance is contingent on the authorities exercising control over the area of operations, permitting the humanitarian aid workers to access the affected populations. Restrictions on access or the creation of blockades hinder both essential, life-saving resources entering the conflict zones, and the humanitarian aid workers entering and assisting vulnerable civilians. The instances of humanitarian aid workers sent with relief to civilian populations, experiencing restricted or denied access, is increasing. The affected populations

heavily rely on the humanitarian aid workers being able to access the areas in crisis. The limited access is added onto other hindrances the aid workers face, like their dependence on unreliable or limited military efforts, like in Uganda, or physical security barriers, like in Palestine (Egeland, 2004, p 135).

One of the main principles, and a fundamental characteristic of humanitarian aid work, is non-discrimination. In contemporary conflicts, however, there are instances where the different parties to the conflict do not deem the other party is entitled to or *deserve* protection or aid in any form (DeBois & Healy, 2024, p 96). As we know from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); “All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination” (UDHR, 1948, art. 8). Human rights are equal to everyone with no distinction on socioeconomic or ideological status, or “...on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty” (UDHR, 1948, art. 2). Limiting the access to humanitarian aid based on discrimination and choosing who *deserves* protection or not, is thus a notion working directly against UDHR.

Regarding the protection and status of independent humanitarian organizations, they must be respected and granted access to do their job. As clearly stated in an ICRC review report from 2007 while reciting Article 59 of the Geneva Convention IV; “If the whole or part of the population of an occupied territory is inadequately supplied, the Occupying Power shall agree to relief schemes on behalf of the said population, and shall facilitate them by all the means at its disposal” (Mackintosh, 2007, p 116). In a Resolution 58/114 by the General Assembly, they also call upon governments and other parties to humanitarian emergencies, especially armed conflicts in which humanitarian aid workers are operating, to fully cooperate with relevant humanitarian agencies, organizations and the UN. This includes ensuring unhindered and safe access for the humanitarian personnel along with equipment and supplies to make sure tasks are efficiently performed (United Nations General Assembly, 2003, para. 10).

The ICRC Code of Conduct was established to maintain high standards of effectiveness, independence and impact by being applied and interpreted in conformity with international humanitarian law. It mostly concerns the importance of the delivery of impartial aid and making sure the populations in crisis will get what they need (ICRC, 1994, p 1-5). The Code also includes

an Annex with responsibilities for Host governments, Donor Governments and IGOs (Inter-governmental organizations). The hosting government(s) of a disaster must respect NGAHs (Non-Governmental Humanitarian Agencies) impartial actions, facilitate access, communication flow, timely flow of relief goods and provide coordinated disaster information (ICRC, 1994, p 6). These elements are vital for effective and proper conduct when providing aid to people desperately in need of these relief resources and support. In the Annex concerning the roles of the host government; they need to both recognize and respect the NGHAs as independent and impartial, and, as stated in the second paragraph of the Annex; “If NGHAs are to act in full compliance with their humanitarian principles, they should be granted rapid and impartial access to disaster victims, for the purpose of delivering humanitarian assistance. It is the duty of the host government... not to block such assistance” (ICRC, 1994, p 5).

The emergence of a shift in access and prioritizing has occurred. The prioritized areas are, to a larger extent than earlier, areas of less operational difficulty, often with other agencies already established. International humanitarian actors gaining access to the areas in most acute needs are decreasing, thus some organizations prioritize areas in less acute need of aid to be able to provide aid somewhere. This access strategy is likely to become more of a norm for international humanitarian organizations because of cost reduction measures leading to lack of personnel and poor security risk management capacities. Hence, remaining local humanitarian organizations are operating increasingly alone in difficult areas which are hard to access and work in (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 11). With this exposure, local humanitarian aid workers are facing the highest security risks.

1.5 Security of humanitarian aid workers

Access for humanitarian aid workers to areas in crisis and people in need is becoming increasingly restricted, as discussed previously. Providing aid in a shrinking humanitarian space is becoming more of a politicized process, respect for humanitarian law and humanitarian principles are declining, and attacks on humanitarian aid workers are increasing (Collinson & Elhawary, p 5, 2012). According to interviews and surveys with over 100 aid workers worldwide, along with reviews of articles and guidelines portrayed in a report done by Legal Action Worldwide (n.d.), 81% of the aid workers had been a victim themselves or had colleagues who had been victims of violence during their course of work. In 2012, Collinson and Elhawary (2012) argued an important reason for the increase on attacks against humanitarian aid workers, were the fact that there were physically more aid workers and agencies operating in dangerous areas than earlier. This is,

however, not an essential reason anymore, as the access limitations and funding cuts have made it very difficult for many humanitarian aid workers to operate in areas of need in the same way as before.

The legal framework of protection offered to humanitarian aid workers can be characterized as follows: Their protection consisting of protection against mistreatment while in hands of the enemy, Geneva law applies, and with protection from an attack, Hague law applies (Mackintosh, 2007, p 117). Humanitarian aid workers are legally protected internationally. A report from Legal Action Worldwide (2024) lists the main frameworks applicable to humanitarian aid workers. First, International humanitarian law affords protection to humanitarian aid workers in two ways. They are entitled to the same protection as civilians, provided they do not take part in hostilities, and they are protected through articles that specifically addresses humanitarian personnel. The security and safety of humanitarian aid workers are essential preconditions for the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance to civilian populations.

Secondly, the Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court classifies intentional attacks against humanitarian personnel as war crimes. Likewise, the intentional use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is recognized as a war crime (Legal Action Worldwide, 2004, p 20). All forms of violence towards humanitarian personnel, including obstructing their tasks and discharging humanitarian operations, is also strongly condemned by the United Nations General Assembly (2003, para. 7). In the Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court, article 8, there is specific prohibition on attacks against humanitarian aid workers. It declares these serious violations as prohibited: “Intentionally directing attacks against personnel, installations, material, units or vehicles involved in a humanitarian assistance or peacekeeping mission in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, as long as they are entitled to the protection given to civilians or civilian objects under the international law of armed conflict” (*Rome Statue*, 1998, art. 8(b)(iii)). Directly in customary law is also a prohibition on kidnapping, mistreating or murdering humanitarian aid workers in any armed conflict (Mackintosh, 2007, p 121).

If the crime against a humanitarian aid worker is classified as crimes against humanity, genocide or a war crime, the act is part of international criminal law. Other states can then put the perpetrator at trial as universal jurisdiction applies. This can be crucial as humanitarian aid workers often operate in areas where they are vulnerable to kidnapping, murder, mistreatment or attacks without the presence of a well-functioning judicial system. Customary international law also applies to

humanitarian operations as humanitarian organizations and their workers also benefit from the general civilian protection (Mackintosh, 2007, p 118). It is hard to determine if acts are “serious enough” to be classified as war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity. Crimes against humanity are often committed within an armed conflict but can also appear in other contexts of systematic patterns or widespread attacks against civilians. If the attacks against the humanitarian aid workers is a part of a broader attack against the population where the operation has its mission, or the attacks has the goal of impeding humanitarian activity within the area, it can be operationalized and judged as crimes against humanity. This includes obstructing access to lifesaving aid (Mackintosh, 2007, p 122).

The Aid Worker Security Report (2025) reported a worrying new peak in the numbers of violence against humanitarian workers. Sudan and Gaza are producing the highest numbers of casualties amongst aid workers, while other notable countries were Democratic Republic of the Cogo (DRC), Ukraine, Yemen, Burkina Faso, Lebanon, Somalia and Nigeria. Humanitarians have experienced an increase in risk because of factors such as lack of public or local acceptance, security risk management capacities and the sudden and extreme loss of funding, which will be discussed later. While the report examines direct connections between violent incidents and program cuts, it has become increasingly difficult to uphold frequent and effective monitoring standards in the field, as economic resources are declining. The decrease of security capacities, communications positions and other critical aid functions have instigated impossible discussions and decisions. Some of these have included the choice between abandoning communities in crisis or accepting an inevitable increase in risk exposure for the humanitarian aid workers.

The UN Security Council made Resolution 2730 in 2024, which for the first time calls for judicial redress and accountability rather than merely condemning attacks against humanitarian aid workers (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 3). In many articles of treaties and conventions, humanitarian workers are involved either directly by explicit mentioning, or indirectly dependent on how terms are operationalized. An example of indirect and valid protection for humanitarian aid workers, are laws valid for “persons taking no active part in hostilities”, where humanitarian workers fall under that scope (Mackintosh, 2007, p 120). In 2025, Legal Action Worldwide (2025) brought together 40 NGOs, legal professionals and UN member states to discuss how to strengthen accountability and legal protection along with remedies for humanitarian aid worker victims of violence. Increasing legal advice, improving investigations and prosecutions and advocate for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2730 was suggested.

The Optional Protocol to the 1994 Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel, was adopted in 2005 and entered into force in 2010. The Optional Protocol was instigated primarily due to the dramatic increase in deliberate, deadly attacks against aid workers, culminating in the 2003 Canal Hotel bombing in Bagdad, targeting the UN Head Quarters. 22 people were killed, including the UN Special Representative for Iraq Sergio Viera de Mello, and over 100 others injured – all civilian, humanitarian aid workers. This, together with the 9/11 bombing the US, was a clear defining moment in the perception of humanitarian aid (UN News, 2025). The Optional Protocol recognizes that the purpose of United Nations operations is to deliver political, development or humanitarian assistance as part of emergency support or peacebuilding. These operations entail significant risks for the humanitarian aid workers. As the UN were “*Deeply concerned* over the continuing pattern of attacks against United Nations and associated personnel”, the aid personnel required specific legal protection (*Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Safety on United Nations and Associated Personnel [Optional Protocol]*, 2005). The Protocol is applicable both in emergency humanitarian assistance, and the delivery of political, development or humanitarian assistance (*Optional Protocol*, 2005, art. II). The Protocol is an important legal framework to illustrate the evolution of legislation for the protection of humanitarian aid workers. It is not applicable to Israel, being a part in the case study, however, as they have not ratified the Optional Protocol.

The *Security Policy Manual* by the UN Security Management System (UNSMS) is a policy framework provided for accountable and effective security management in diverse operational environments. As the highest level of guidance within UNSMS, it establishes principles and policy requirements for achieving objectives, where compliance with its provisions is mandatory (United Nations Department of Safety and Security [UNDSS], 2017, p 5). “This Framework of Accountability provides clear guidance on how to enable the conduct of United Nations activities while ensuring the safety, security and well-being of personnel, premises and assets” (UNDSS, 2017, p 13). The Security Policy Manual thus protects the security of humanitarian aid workers, and specify the implementation of the “no programme without security, no security without resources”-strategy is necessary for all programs (UNDSS, 2017, p 15).

This is a difficult strategy to uphold as many international aid workers are not accessing the areas in crisis. The majority of UN personnel working in the field of operation, living in conditions of violent and insecure situations, are local UN personnel. The UN claims they are committed to local

humanitarian aid workers' security and safety with implementation of policies adapted to the different contexts (UNDSS, 2017, p 77). Commitment is important, but the implementation is difficult in insecure and unsafe areas with decreasing respect for human decency, human rights and international humanitarian law. In 2021, concerns were raised about the lack of specific needs, capacity and protection mechanisms for local actors gathering and sharing information and data to international organizations. Local partners and actors are key as they can provide knowledge of the context, approaches, develop existing initiatives and thus effectively deliver humanitarian assistance (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2021, p 2). Between 1997 and 2008, incidents directly affecting local and national aid workers were around three times as many as the incidents affecting the international humanitarian aid personnel (Collinson & Elhawary, p 11, 2012).

The increased targeting of humanitarian aid workers can be understood as a predictable consequence of the heavy Western-led intervention footprint. There are many countries with complex history of foreign interventions and conflicts. This has naturally generated particular dynamics of violence and hostilities against Western organizations, actors and institutions (Collinson & Elhawary, p 10, 2012). Some issues in the cooperation between international actors and local actors working in the best interest for both parties have occurred, which further supports skepticism towards the West. Local aid structures have in the past been marginalized, while international agencies have seized implementation and decision-making processes. Key personnel from local organizations have been “snatched” by international agencies, undermining the capacities of local organizations. This can result in an impression of the humanitarian sector as a Western construct, with Western values, behaviors and interests at heart. When the humanitarian sector is perceived this way, it can easily be rejected, challenged or distrusted by the local population, which can further threaten the situation of security for humanitarian aid workers (Collinson & Elhawary, p 20, 2012).

1.5.1 Symbols and targeted attacks

The number of violent incidents against humanitarian aid workers have increased over the years, and hit a record of major violent incidents with 125 kidnappings, 383 killings and 308 woundings in 2024. This followed an already violent year of 2023 with an 36% increase of casualties from the year before (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 4). One alarming development has been the increase in risk of ambushes on clearly marked humanitarian aid vehicles. This displays the increase in intentional attacks against aid workers. In Ethiopia, transportation routes were the biggest target of

armed actors, who ambushed personnel travelling in clearly marked humanitarian convoys and vehicles (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 5).

The largest humanitarian organizations have well-known symbols, which used to ensure safety to humanitarian aid workers in conflict areas, as belligerent sides to the conflict knew they were impartial, neutral and present to provide life-saving assistance to people in need. Though the significance has not changed, the perception of them has. The Red Cross, Crescent and Crystal insignias, within the International Red Cross and red Crescent Movement, are examples of such protected symbols. “It is essential they stand unchallenged as symbols of neutral and independent assistance at all times, guaranteeing protection in times of conflict and disaster. Governments have also accepted an obligation to prevent their misuse and abuse, which in many countries can lead to prosecution” (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC], 2026). While these symbols were almost guaranteeing protection a few decades ago, it is no longer guaranteed. In some cases, they have rather become a target for attack. An increasing number of marked cargo and personnel vehicles have been targeted by people deliberately wanting to attack humanitarian organizations and aid workers for various reasons.

The lack of respect and commitment to international humanitarian law has become evident by these attacks, both by targeting humanitarian aid workers and civilians, but also by destroying civilian infrastructure. Russian aerial attacks during the ongoing war in Ukraine, have demonstrated the rising and repeated violations of international humanitarian law in conflict, as the attacks has been directed against aid distribution sites. Airstrikes have been the most fatal form of attack in the last years, also in Gaza. Kidnappings of humanitarian aid workers have increased, particularly in transitional or contested areas or along key routes of transportation. Non-state armed groups have employed attacks, kidnappings and ambushes as tactics of extortion, coercion and intimidation to generate leverage and spread fear and insecurity. In addition, local de facto authorities and state actors have used detention and arrest of humanitarian personnel as tools of control, harassment and psychological intimidation. According to *Humanitarian Outcomes* (2025, p 6), this represents an alarming trend as state authorities are increasingly targeting aid workers and thereby obstructing the delivery of aid rather than facilitating humanitarian assistance and capacity for the populations under their jurisdiction. Consequently, Iqtait (2026) argues that humanitarian action has become a tool of weaponization by the conflicting parties in an armed conflict: depriving civilians in need of life-saving assistance. Interconnected mechanisms such as the politization of aid is an essential variable of decreasing security measures.

Mackintosh (2007) presents two points of view regarding the security of humanitarian aid workers. One side argue humanitarian aid workers need stronger security measures and more specific protection than civilians, particularly because the protection currently offered is incomplete and led to an increase of attacks against humanitarian personnel. Humanitarian aid workers are under constant danger in their operations to assist civilians in the heart of conflicts. The other side argue this is part of the job; the humanitarian aid workers have decided to work in these dangerous areas. Civilians, however, are forced to stay and survive within these areas. Hence, humanitarian aid workers should not “claim” more protection than the civilians they have sworn to protect. Furthermore, it could affect and strengthen the image of aid organizations as western actors coming into areas to save the local population and further promote the white savior complex many aid workers are desperately trying to avoid (Mackintosh, 2007, p 123).

1.5.2. Defunding and financial cuts

Throughout the decades there have been shifting recommendations concerning different factors of human rights and development. In 2004 ideas for reorienting the security agenda towards human rights and human security in more comprehensive ways, were in focus. To accomplish this reorientation, enormous investment and commitment by the international community, governments, business leaders, financial institutions and civil society were required. Acquiring more money and new funds were fundamental to accomplish the newfound approach to security within trade and humanitarian aid. In addition, meeting social needs of marginalized and poor communities was necessary to help countries and areas in crisis and build effective and fair police and justice systems. Social and economic justice should go hand in hand with legal justice, and the distinct focus on acquiring funds supporting this vision was a priority in the early 2000s (Khan, 2004, p 25). The need for stable funds and acquiring more money to the humanitarian and security sector and organizations seemed necessary but possible at a time. However, as observed today, the need for financial aid and stronger funding structures are more serious than ever and still not prioritized.

As part of a the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) process in the US administration, President Donald Trump decided to stall USAID; critical aid agency for humanitarian projects, resulting in a drop in up to 99% of funding to areas in crisis by March 2025 (Africa Training Institute, 2025). Global aid downsizing and program closures in general, and in particular with the closure of USAID, do not simply have severe consequences for the aid recipients or aid workers. The humanitarian aid sector is risking the loss of high operational standards, professional training

capacities and technical expertise. This undermines the operational security in an already difficult sector characterized by increasingly dangerous work environments. The sudden global departure of both funds and personnel from humanitarian sectors and areas in need has deeply impacted both aid recipients and remaining local aid workers who are left in a position of insecurity and increasing threats (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 9).

Development and evolution in the security risk management for humanitarian aid operations has changed in the past two decades. Security risk management has become a machine of specialized technical function, critical to provide humanitarian access in areas of insecure and severe conflicts and crises. This machine is costly with reliance on equipment for secure communication, transport, training to produce skilled personnel, and facilities. The loss of funding normally covering these costs, and thus competition over the remaining resources, is threatening the progress made over the past decades (Humanitarian Outcome, 2025, p 10). We are already observing a potential fallback to times when security and risk management were discretionary add-ons or treated as an afterthought rather than a very essential factor for all parts and stages of an operation.

There have also been multiple secondary consequences of the funding reductions. Due to heavy cuts in aid funding, safety of movement has been undermined. There has been a forced reduction in flights and other safer ways of travel, which makes road travel the primary reliable passage of transport of goods and people. With more reliance on road travel follows higher security risks with larger obstacles to the presence of humanitarian operations and its workers (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 10). Alongside the loss of security management positions, there has been a “brain drain” from NGOs. Experienced experts have increasingly left their positions at NGOs mostly for the higher paid private sector, due to the uncertainty regarding their positions in the future, due to funding cuts. The need for stability in their career choice has led to security specialists relocating to the corporate world. Hence, the professionalizing of humanitarian security with grounds for operational security has experienced a backlash (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 14).

When USAID stopped their technical assistance and funding to organizations collecting security incident data and third-party humanitarian data, organizations face big risks of closure. Donors are crumbling under pressure prioritizing and deciding which areas and organizations to save. For the organizations gathering information and conducting analyses, this is a major problem as they are not receiving the resources necessary to provide reports to inform decision makers, which further

has consequences for the field security of humanitarian aid workers (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 13). Aid structures are changing due to security threats, deep polarization, and diverse social, economic, political and cultural challenges (Fröhlich, 2018, p 6).

1.5.3 Misinformation and disinformation

Social media has been used as a public relations or fundraising tool for many humanitarian agencies for a long time, rather than a strategic online information environment. Today, it has become clear that social media is essential to defend acceptance and humanitarian principles, especially when hostile narratives have emerged through disinformation campaigns. It has become a collective responsibility to pursue proactive social media engagement and monitoring as it is an essential tool to protect humanitarian space in the 21st century (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 15).

There is a dangerous trend towards acceptance of the developing situation of vulnerable dynamics and harmful narratives. Disinformation and misinformation form the basis for the development of threat behaviors and negative perceptions towards humanitarian aid workers. Negative narratives combined with existing reductions in funding of humanitarian programming, are deeply affecting the reduction of safety for humanitarian aid workers. Fueling community suspicion and exploiting grievances are tactics used by armed groups to consolidate control and block access. Suspicion and disinformation have many focal points, and one negative narrative in particular has affected the perception of humanitarian aid workers. Humanitarian aid agencies have been portrayed as politically motivated, foreign and western controlled, and on the side with enemy groups, and can thus not be trusted. In some cases, this has been weaponized and social media has portrayed humanitarian aid in conflicts, like in DRC, as tools of colonialism, supporting terrorism or Western control (Humanitarian Outcome, 2025, p 12).

Social media has been a key source of spreading disinformation about humanitarian actors. Negative campaigning and online attacks have been used to ridicule the workers or even justify kidnapping or killings. Humanitarian space is further limited by these hostile narratives spreading fear and insecurities. Many agencies and political actors are choosing not to respond publicly to try and limit the exposure, but the silence is not improving the situation. Public communications from aid agencies often contain vague or overly political or diplomatic language, which can fuel the narrative of aid organizations representing foreign, Western powers who believe they are above the recipient countries. Direct community engagement with more precise and clear mediation is thus

essential to sustain acceptance and counter the misinformation spread in an operational environment increasingly contested (Humanitarian Outcome, 2025, p 13).

In this section, essential legal framework and theoretical foundations of terms and concepts have established groundwork for analyzing the research question of the thesis. Humanitarian aid workers are legally protected but are operating within an increasingly shrinking humanitarian space. They are facing restrictions in form of belligerent parties not respecting human rights or international humanitarian law, and economic decline with consequences such as program closures and less funds to security management. The shrinking humanitarian space and the limited and decreasing belief in human rights law, principles and respect for international humanitarian aid organizations, is limiting the life-saving actions of humanitarian aid personnel. The issue of security for humanitarian aid workers is not only reliant on parties to the conflict and prioritization, but also the capacity. It is an increasingly daunting task to send and support aid workers in areas of conflict, and a trend to prioritize areas in which they are granted access and aid workers are not in immediate risk is on a rise. Gaza is one of the conflict areas where limited access and targeted attacks against humanitarian aid workers are occurring today. Hence, this thesis uses Gaza as a case study, and the following chapter presents empirical evidence on the development of variables affecting the security of humanitarian aid workers in Gaza.

2. Introducing the case; Gaza

In this chapter, I will use the theoretical foundation and applicable legal framework together with empiric information to present the case study used in this thesis: Gaza. Using Gaza as a case will display the development of the security conditions for humanitarian aid workers along with other challenges within the operational humanitarian space. Gaza has been perceived as a troubled area for decades. Developments in recent years have put an increased international focus on the area. After the outbreak in 2023 of the ongoing conflict in Gaza, attention has been granted to the atrocities conducted against civilians. Along with deteriorating conditions in the area, the security for humanitarian aid workers have further decreased. This chapter will shortly describe the most essential factors to the development of the political situation and conditions in Gaza, along with an overview of hostile escalations within the Middle East. Then the scope will narrow down on developments within the humanitarian space in Gaza, before displaying the restrictions on access to humanitarian aid and for humanitarian personnel. The chapter will end with displaying the development of the security situation for humanitarian aid workers in Gaza, presenting the variables to be used in the chapter of discussion.

The situation in Gaza has reached new levels of devastation, and is currently in its most profound humanitarian crisis, since 1948. The establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, the war and Israel denying Palestinian refugees from returning to their homes, were triggers for the need of the first relief projects in Gaza. In 2009, the need for humanitarian response was due to an ongoing blockade of Gaza territory, alongside Israeli military using assaults as tactics to depose of the government of Hamas (Feldman, 2009, p 27). “Conditions in Gaza have gotten steadily worse since the start of the second intifada in 2000, deteriorating at an accelerated pace since 2006 and reaching a new nadir in the recent Israeli military assault on the territory” (Feldman, 2009, p 25).

The first intifada in the late 80s to the beginning of the 90s, was a mass uprising of civilian protesters against decades of Israeli occupation. One of the outcomes of the uprising was the increased recognition that Palestinians did not only have humanitarian needs, but legitimate political claims. According to the United Nations Secretary-General (2003), This sparked the process of the Oslo Accords (1993-95), and later The Roadmap for peace (2003), and an acknowledgement of a Palestinian Authority (PA) as the political entity in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). PA ruled in OPT until the parliamentary election in 2006, when Hamas won the majority of seats. This is sparked a political tension, culmination in a Palestinian civil war in 2007. Palestinian governance was decided into two entities, where Hamas de facto governed the Gaza strip, while the internationally recognized PA governed the Westbank.

The 1987 intifada was a concrete event leading to the Oslo Accords: an agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), after many failed attempts to negotiate peace in the past. The process began in the 70s with debates within PLO of the future status of Palestinian territory, how it could be liberated and which areas would stay in Israeli possession. Many suggested a two-state solution, limiting the Palestine State to Gaza and the West Bank. This idea was supported by the Soviet Union but started heated debates within the PLO as the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon resulted in organizational setbacks. Many were convinced of Israeli superiority of military power during the war in Lebanon, as the Palestinian armed struggle did not live up to its challenge (Hassan, 2010, p 941). With the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, PLO did not have any serious international support left. Hence, PLO was forcibly “open” to negotiations, with strong resistance. Israeli authorities used a while longer to agree to the sit-down, as their policy for a long time was divided over the solutions in and future of the OPT (Hassan, 2010, p 942).

Geopolitical developments changed the world order. The emergence of the United States as a new, sole superpower after the fall of the Soviet Union and their success in the Gulf war, made the Israeli policy turned towards compromise (Hassan, 2010, p 943). During the Oslo Accords, Oslo-I was simply a Declaration of Principles, while Oslo-II contained the Gaza Strip and West Bank Interim Agreement specifying the areas as one territorial unit, except for Jerusalem. Some of the Palestinian groups wanted peace with Israel but opposed the Oslo Accords as it did not mention or promise anything surrounding Palestinian statehood, with all external security remaining in Israeli possession (Hassan, 2010, p 945). After the Oslo Accords was signed, a few years of calm followed, before tensions raised and the situation deteriorated to new levels. Palestinians became more impoverished, Palestinian rights were labeled “final status issues”, imbalance in power increased and Israeli control of movement, security and territory continued (Hassan, 2010, p 947). The Oslo Accords was thus a glimmer of hope for a short while before the security situation in the OPT declined and Israeli authorities gained more power. In 2003, the UN, EU, US and Russia introduced a peace initiative called the Roadmap, further envisioning the establishment of a permanent independent Palestinian state, alongside Israel. It was enforced by the UN Security Council but stalled as both parties failed to comply to key obligations. As this peace initiative also failed, the violence continued and the security and humanitarian situation in the OPT continued to deteriorate (United Nations Security Council, 2003).

Iqtait (2025) explains the situation in Gaza as characterized by prolonged political instability with recurring cycles of violence and humanitarian challenges and insecurities for decades. Following the eruption of the current war on 7 October 2023, when Hamas launched an attack on Israel that resulted in the deaths of over 1200 Israeli civilians and soldiers, the conflict escalated significantly. In response, Israeli the government imposed severe restrictions on the Gaza Strip and initiated extensive military operations. The hostilities have had devastating consequences for the Palestinian population, intensifying an already critical humanitarian crisis. By January 2025, more than 150.000 Palestinians had been killed or injured, while more than 80% of buildings have been destroyed. Essential sectors, like the education sector have been severely affected with almost 90% of school buildings damaged and Gaza’s healthcare system facing near-total collapse. These developments have contributed to one of the most severe humanitarian crisis and bloodiest conflict in the region’s modern history.

2.1 Escalation of Hostilities in the Middle East

The worsening of conditions during the hostilities throughout the Middle East has triggered a severe humanitarian crisis impacting all citizens, especially vulnerable civilians (Humanitarian Action, 2026). By the beginning of 2026, the Middle East had already been the hot spot for people in need of humanitarian aid and protection, consisting of the largest numbers of citizens in crisis for years. The situation has accelerated by the indirect and direct consequences of hostilities and armed conflict in the beginning of 2026. The ongoing conflicts keep producing high numbers of civilians at risk. By now the hostilities has resulted in 3.6 million people in urgent need of humanitarian protection and assistance in OPT, 22.3 million people in Yemen and 16.5 million in Syria (OCHA 2026, p 4).

In the Middle East, there are brave humanitarian aid workers operating under mentally harsh and physically difficult conditions, striving to deliver aid in an extensive reach. Although they are assisting communities everywhere, their aid is not extensive enough to meet the numbers of civilians and people in need. Two vital variables such as limited access to aid and financial deprivation are making humanitarian missions harder. Obstruction and delay of essential humanitarian relief is ongoing within land territories, maritime and air corridors which are severely restricted in the Middle East. Civilians in a large number of conflict zones are not accessing the aid they sorely need, amplifying the risk of deprivation of life-saving measures. ICRC, UN and NGOs need more funding as they are rapidly facing rising costs in a demanding field. The response plan by “Humanitarian Action analyzing needs and response”, delivering lifesaving aid and defending International humanitarian law, acknowledge the field of operation as marked by polarization, impunity, indifference and threats against the lives of people needing aid and the personnel providing aid (Humanitarian Action, 2026).

The rapid decrease in financial resources and cuts in funding has constrained humanitarian aid in all its forms, limiting humanitarian action where it is needed the most (OCHA, 2026, p 7). The percentage of funding to humanitarian action was in 2025 its lowest since 2016, which has caused humanitarian organizations within the Middle East to reduce staff, shut programs and close offices. An increase in financial support and safeguarding passages, routes and movement of humanitarian goods is essential to ensure the aid and support, without obstruction or delay, reaches the communities and civilians in need (OCHA, 2026, p 10). In an overview of financial response plans to the communities in the Middle East, the highest percentage of planned funding actually funded is 13% to the Syrian Arab Republic, while the OPT only has 7% funded. The low percentage of

accomplished funding is, to make matters worse, of a budget with insufficient planned funding, compared to the total people in need of aid. For example: In Yemen, 8% of the budget is funded, and that is of the planned funding to 12 million people targeted, while the people in actual need are 22.3 million people (OCHA, 2026, p 13).

The cooperation of organizations is important to provide relevant and targeted relief in the largest scale possible. Many local and national NGOs have lacked full-time security staff due to low economic resources. As there is a global decline of humanitarian aid funding, this has become a much larger capacity problem. One staff member of a national NGO noted to the Humanitarian Outcome report (2025); “Previously, joint field visits were conducted with other organizations... This no longer happens because either the organisations are no longer present in the territory or because it has become too expensive” (Humanitarian Outcome, 2025, p 10). Capacity- and funding problems makes it difficult to deliver aid on a sufficient scale. Minimum standards of quality in humanitarian action are set by The Sphere Association, who in 2025 warned the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation that their approach does not adhere to core humanitarian principles and standards. There has been a normalization of suffering and hopelessness in the international community. This normalization by different organizations has been heavily criticized, as systematic dehumanization with further weaponization of water, food and other aid along with repeated displacement is happening under the watch of the international community (International NGO Safety Organization [INSO], 2025).

Across the region of the Middle East, the conflicts are worsening and protection risks are rising. Increased violence in armed conflicts and widespread unexploded ordnance contamination and landmines are examples of physical danger and threats. The civilians, including displaced people and migrants, are also exposed to exploitations, discrimination, trafficking, gender-based violence and family separation, while the legal systems undermine their safety (OCHA, 2026, p 4). The Middle East is under pressure of conflict, and physical as well as psychological damage and trauma. While humanitarian action is responsive and helpful, it cannot create peace or substitute political solutions which the region sorely lacks. Humanitarian partners can, however, call for dialogue and de-escalation with the goal of peaceful settlements. To achieve this goal, all parties of the complex situations and conflicts must follow and respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and ensure it is protected. Protecting civilians is one of the cornerstones of humanitarian law, along with protection of civilian infrastructure. States and all parties to the conflict must facilitate

an effective and clear passage allowing humanitarian aid to flow through the borders in order for resources to reach civilians in need (OCHA, 2026, p 10).

2.2 Humanitarian space development in Gaza

The decades since the Cold War have been increasingly challenging for humanitarian actors and the maintenance of a neutral humanitarian space in conflict zones (Hansen, 2004, p 164). The situation in Gaza characterized by unsafe situations of armed conflict and the worsening socioeconomic situation has steadily declined in the last decade and a half. In 2023 1.6 millions of 2.4 million people living in Gaza, were initially displaced persons. This number has further increased to approximately 80% of the population being internally displaced or, 10% refugees, leaving Gaza. The blockade on air, sea and land imposed by Israel in 2007 following the Gaza Strip being conquered by Hamas, has led to the citizens living under collective punishment. Access to resources, markets and people's movements are severely restricted. The UN Secretary General declared that the blockade contravenes international humanitarian law as the civilian population is being severely punished for acts, they have not committed themselves (UNRWA, 2023). Civilians are not safe in Gaza and have for a long time been exposed to the many violations of international humanitarian law carried out by the Israeli army and authorities, claiming their right to self-defense to eradicate terrorist groups planning actions against Israel. In the OPT, physical violations like killings, destruction of institutions and house demolitions has been conducted for decades in addition to failure to investigate killings of civilians and tactics like humiliation, degradation and restrictions on movement (Khan, 2004, p 19).

Food security, humanitarian and service deliveries on land, poverty and unemployment were some of the factors in crisis in August 2023. 2 months before the intense and ongoing armed conflict erupted, it was stated that "...the already fragile humanitarian situation in Gaza threatens to deteriorate further" (UNRWA, 2023). 95% of the population lived without availability of clear water, power shortages and decline in the economy which made the living situation in Gaza barely livable by minimum standards. Many was already living in refugee camps with some of the highest population densities in the world (UNRWA, 2023). United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is a UN Agency made for Palestine refugees. Palestinian refugees are defined as "persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict" (UNRWA, n.d.). UNRWA started carrying out their operations in 1950. In the

beginning they were assisting and responding to the needs of 750.000 Palestine refugees, but today the numbers have increased to about 5.9 million Palestinian refugees (UNRWA, n.d.).

UNRWA had its scope on refugee reintegration for a long time, but needed to expand to a multi-functional organization also providing health, relief and social services, along with education to Palestine refugees. In the humanitarian space UNRWA operates, a portion of the aid workers operating are Palestinian refugees, as the highly prolonged and violent conflict has inflicted aid workers in a great variety of conflict situations. Within humanitarianism, identifying vulnerabilities and who needs assistance the most is strategic to compel organizations and people to donate. Throughout the years it has thus been discussions of who are qualified to receive aid from UNRWA and other organizations, and thus how to operationalize Palestinian refugees. Hence, some people in crisis face the risk of losing their identification as victims, which shows the power of humanitarian discourse. However, in the aftermath of the Israeli offensive in the beginning of the 2000s, MSF supported the evaluation by medical personnel from Gaza that all the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip are suffering the war, without exception. This statement established and strengthened their narrative throughout other humanitarian organizations and called attention to the fact that Gaza's entire population fits within the victim category. There were similar efforts to expand relief eligibility in 1948, which was blocked by institutional requirements in the emerging aid regime (Feldman, 2009, p 31).

National NGOs are the main humanitarian actors in the fields of operation, with Gaza as exception. UNRWA is de facto primary responder, employing the largest portion of humanitarian personnel and experience the highest numbers of aid workers killed (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 7). UNRWA has experienced the decrease in humanitarian aid worker security also before the outbreak of the large-scale armed conflict that started in 2023. In 2021, there was a total of 193 Agency personnel in the area affected by security- and safety incidents. Compared to 2020, that number represents an increase of almost 30% in a year. Largely, this was due to an increase in incidents of intimidation, which continued into 2022. Many of the incidents was because of direct attacks on, or intrusions into, UNRWA premises (United Nations Secretary-General, 2022, Annex V, sec. 2, p. 24).

The causality and risk burden transferred from international organizations to local NGOs, has evolved due to several conditions severely restricting the international presence over the years in a shrinking humanitarian space. Some of these restrictions has been the decreasing acceptance and

tolerance of international humanitarian aid organizations, bureaucratic obstacles and hostilities from the host state, lack of economic resources, and chronic insecurity, heavy fire and fighting restricting the physical access, or governments banning aid organizations from entering large areas of operation. The humanitarian presence has consequently decreased and made the situation for the remaining humanitarian aid workers in Gaza worse. They are vulnerable to attacks and spread of targeted disinformation and misinformation campaigns, which further increases security risk and spreads mistrust in the community (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 7). Many international actors in the early 2000s hesitated to aid Gaza and fund rehabilitation, as they were scared to strengthen Hamas, who were not internationally acknowledged as authorities of Gaza. The mistrust, not only within the communities but from an international perspective has slowed the process of relief delivery. Possible donors and aid organizations can motivate humanitarian resources and attention, but many are facing complications as these decisions always are embedded in broader legal, moral and political conditions, even when it is supposed to be non-political and neutral. Increasing politicization of aid and humanitarian missions must stop and actors must rise above the political strife between Arab, Palestinian and foreign powers. Humanitarian aid should be nonnegotiable, nonpolitical and be funded by all actors possible to minimize damage on innocent lives (Feldman, 2009, p 33).

After President Donald Trump decided to freeze most of US foreign development, USAID funded relief programs got abruptly shut down. This unexpected executive order has affected millions of aid recipients all over the world, aid workers have lost their jobs and the remaining personnel in the contested areas have been abandoned by resources, funding and colleagues. The backbone of the international humanitarian aid system has historically been the US, as they represented over a third of aid contributions. The global response capacity has unraveled as other large humanitarian donors consequently have cut their fundings as well. Much of the coordination, data assets and analysis, assessments, transport and logistics of diverse aid projects was also under the scope of USAID (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 8). The closure of USAID has also encouraged “anti-aid”. This negative trend is projecting further hostilities against the aid sector and shrinking humanitarian space. The security functions and resources needed to deliver necessary aid in Gaza is not fully operational when local aid workers without much help are responsible for the vulnerable community (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 7). USAID was for a long time amongst the largest single investors in systems underpinning crisis response with a wide range of humanitarian data. The data included analysis of operational security, public health surveillance, early warnings of famine and displacement within needs tracking and assessments. The withdrawal has showed a

severe vulnerability in the humanitarian sector. Following the freeze of assets, the effectiveness of others allocating resources, forecasting risks and guiding decisions has declined (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025, p 13).

As Collison and Elhawary (2012) explains, humanitarian space and its correspondence with international humanitarian law, calls for all parties to uphold and meet humanitarian needs, and allow impartial humanitarian organizations to provide aid, access and protection to affected civilians. Spread across the Middle East, 5.9 million Palestine refugees require urgent assistance and protection, mostly provided by UNRWA (OCHA, 2026, p 5). With limited access to Gaza and the Westbank, caused by the Israeli authorities and military, this is a significant problem. Humanitarian aid workers, their identity cards, physical and mental safety, access and vehicles are not protected or respected (OCHA, 2026, p 5). Israel has explained their restrictions on UNRWA's humanitarian space as necessary for military security. When one part of the conflict wields overwhelming power of the physical space, skills of negotiation, diplomacy and persuasion must be employed to maintain humanitarian space in the conflict zone; moral principles rather than political, military or economic interests are necessary (Hansen, 2004, p 157-158).

UNRWA has faced great challenges within humanitarian space for years with threats of detentions, freedom of movement; of goods, vehicles and staff, misuse and damage of their premises, installations and refugee shelters, and of the safety and security to all people inside the humanitarian space, including the humanitarian staff. Armed attacks on humanitarian personnel and installations along with severe access restrictions has defined the history of Gaza's humanitarian space. Some of the most difficult challenges protecting humanitarian space has been faced since the 2000s and are still raging today (Hansen, 2004, p 150). In 2014, UNRWA declared a humanitarian emergency on the Gaza Strip due to escalation of hostilities with consequences of destruction, displacement, human loss and devastation. It was an unprecedented and catastrophic conflict, as the third one within seven years. The effects of blockades, violence and armed conflict since then have continued to have psychological impact on the citizens. Hostilities, damage to homes and infrastructure, airstrikes, firing of rockets have happened regularly for years, with new rounds of hostilities happening before the population has recovered from the last. Shorter attacks with devastating consequences have also happened fairly regularly. More than 200 Palestinians were killed in Gaza after an 11-day escalation of hostilities in 2021, including 60 children and 19 UNRWA students (UNRWA, 2023). The long deteriorating situation has become even worse after the outbreak of the ongoing armed conflict in 2023.

Humanitarian actors try to provide services and aid where they can. UNRWA personnel provides assistance to both Gaza and the West Bank. However, no UNRWA international staff are permitted to enter OPT which includes Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. This is a consequence of the Israeli parliament who passed a law in October 2024, prohibiting UNRWA operations in territories of Israeli control or where they interpret the sovereignty and authority as theirs. The Agency's international staff has not been granted permits or visas by the Israeli authorities to enter OPT since the end of January 2025. Furthermore, Israeli authorities have been blocking UNRWA and other aid providers directly from bringing humanitarian aid and personnel into Gaza since March 2025. UNRWA has pre-positioned tons of aid outside Gaza with enough food and shelter supplies for hundreds of thousands of people but are completely unable to enter. This is despite the desperate and increasing needs within the borders and blockades of Gaza. Because of this total blockade by the Israeli authorities and direct prohibition on supplying humanitarian assistance and resources, UNRWA ran out of food by the end of April 2025 without any possibility to directly bring more since March 2025. Before the total blockade, they had moments of extensive reach, for example during the ceasefire that lasted until March 2025. During the ceasefire they were able to provide critical food assistance that reached over two million people (UNRWA, 2026).

2.3 Humanitarian access in Gaza

As early as 2004, humanitarian access in Palestine "...continues to be a cause of serious concern" (Egeland, 2004, p 135). Further limiting the access at the time was a new security barrier which affected the delivery of essential services, impacting the livelihood in the community. At the time, it was not known how much worse everything would get. The isolation of Gaza is a direct result of closure and surveillance policies from Israel, further aggravated by Palestinian politics. "Gaza is isolated in two respects: most Gazans and the goods they produce cannot get out, whether to the West Bank or the outside world, while most other people, whether Palestinians living elsewhere or foreigners, cannot get in" (Feldman, 2009, p 32). The exception to these limitations is the Israeli military who have the power and capacity allowing them to move in and out of Gaza however they want. The Israeli closure policy has rendered the space of operation in Gaza almost impossible to access. The only people finding themselves within the borders are classified as aid workers, victims or Israeli military actors (Feldman, 2009, p 33).

To punish the Palestinian people for their election of Hamas and to contain the intifada, Israeli authority intensified its closure of Gaza in the early 2000s. While increasing restrictions, Israeli

authorities insisted they were concerned with the welfare of the population. They implied they were motivated to do their best to facilitate humanitarian solutions while simultaneously denying Gaza had a humanitarian crisis (Feldman, 2009, p 29). In 2006, before Hamas won the election, 63% of the population in Gaza was dependent on humanitarian aid. In 2008, in the aftermath of the victory, Israeli restrictions imposed on Gaza, led to over 80% of the population being dependent on humanitarian aid. The effect of the restriction of the Gazan borders is illustrated by the number of Palestinians crossing the border out of Gaza to work in Israel. Before the first intifada, 70,000 Palestinians worked in Israel and before the first implementation of closure policy by Israeli in 1991, the numbers were around 50,000. In 2000 the number was down to 24,000, and by 2009, zero Palestinians crossed the borders to attend work in Israel (Feldman, 2009, p 30).

This situation has been difficult to replicate as the government of Israel has systematically and deliberately dismantled the humanitarian system. Their order of restrictions and blockade is not only shutting out lifesaving relief and humanitarian aid workers from UNRWA but also being used to shutting down almost all aid operations attempting to assist. Shutting down the access to aid is creating a military-controlled, deadly alternative that does not meet basic humanitarian needs nor protect civilians. The few humanitarian aid workers and actors left within the borders remain ready to deliver the aid available, but the circumstances of aid delivery areas are designed to sustain a cycle of danger, death and desperation. After the reimposing of a near-total blockade on commercial goods and humanitarian aid in 2025, the humanitarian conditions in Gaza have further collapsed in a rapid pace. With the new Israeli scheme, weakened and starving civilians are trying to access the small amounts of aid coming through the borders at small and far distribution sites. The walk along the chaotic and violent trail is long and dangerous before arriving at militarized distribution sites with single entry points, surrounded by active conflict in a dangerous terrain (INSO, 2025).

In 2025, Israeli forces have displaced, with force, nearly two million Palestinians and continued attacks and killings by food distribution sites. Both on the inside and on the outside of the Gaza boarder, tons of clean water, shelter items, medical supplies, fuel and food is waiting untouched as the humanitarian aid workers and organizations are blocked from both receiving it and delivering it. Malnutrition and death of dehydration and hunger are spiking with most of the population not receiving life-essential supplies for weeks. The International NGO Safety organization (2025) argue organizations and governments cannot continue to wait for current arrangements to change or wait for permission to act. To ensure access to everyone in Gaza, military-controlled distribution models

should be rejected while states pursue concrete measures to lift administrative and bureaucratic restrictions while halting the transport and transfer of ammunition and weapons (INSO, 2025).

The humanitarian crisis in the Middle East is causing the most momentous disruptions in the global humanitarian supply chains since the beginning of the Russian war on Ukraine, and COVID-19 with the delays and stops of delivery of life-saving supplies (OCHA, 2026, p 5). With the disruption of supply lines across the Middle East, the emergency relief has problems appearing in Gaza, not only because of the Israeli authorities but other conflicts in the area are inflicting the access. All conflicts in the Middle East are disrupting the corridors and maritime chokepoints the humanitarian supply chains are dependent on. Specific resources like energy, fertilizer and fuel are affected along with the increasing risk of global inflation. The inflation makes the already tapped out markets increase their high prices on life essential resources like food (OCHA, 2026 p 5).

After Israeli authorities shut the crossings into Gaza, there has been a stop to the flow of medical evacuations, humanitarian staff rotations, return from residents from abroad, and a broad variety of aid. Some aid, humanitarian personnel and fuel have been let through while essential supplies are stuck at the gates (Humanitarian Action, 2026). From the situation report from 3rd of June 2026, Israeli military forces have claimed control of approximately 70% of the Gaza Strip. This leads to further overcrowding of Gaza, causing a mass-displacement into a small area. This is also restricting humanitarian access and directly undermining missions and operations, for example by UNRWA. There has been an intensification of air strikes from Israeli forces and increasing evacuation orders. Humanitarian operations and workers are at risk across Gaza with severe shortages of resources, vehicles and health services, alongside shortage of essential infrastructure like water systems (UNRWA, 2026).

2.4. Humanitarian aid workers in Gaza

The escalation of violence in the turbulent situation distinguished by armed conflict in the Middle East, has further limited the operational humanitarian space (OCHA, 2026, p 5). In 2023, Legal Action Worldwide (2025) reported that during the history of UN, Gaza represents the conflict with most UN staff killed ever with more than 100 deaths within a month. The brutal attacks on humanitarian aid workers in multiple areas like Ukraine, DRC, Sudan and Gaza both undermines core principles of global relief efforts, and breach international humanitarian law. Protecting humanitarian aid workers has always been a challenge, but today it is harder than ever with attacks against humanitarian personnel accelerating rapidly (Protect Aid Workers, n.d.). Much is explicitly

written about UNRWA and MSF but many other organizations are operating within the area of Gaza.

Humanitarian aid workers are operating within extremely insecure and difficult operational environments. In the latest years, especially after the outbreak of the ongoing conflict in Gaza, there has been an increasing risk in their missions, goals and lives of the humanitarian aid workers. The personnel as part of response operations in the field, either international, national, regional or local, are experiencing extreme restrictions under sustained strain. While being expected to provide essential and life-saving aid and protection to others, they are being directly affected and inflicted by the conflict. Humanitarian personnel are also grieving, experiencing the same issues emerging for civilians, struggling to operate under enormous pressure, and are being displaced themselves (OCHA, 2026, p 5). The trend of weaponizing starvation in Gaza is not only a tool against the civilians; the aid workers are increasingly struggling to perform their tasks as they are dependent on the same nurturing supplies and thus experiencing dehydration, malnutrition and the risk of being killed on their way to find food for civilians, themselves and their colleagues (INSO, 2025).

In a journal article from 2011, Lillywhite argues that the vulnerability of the humanitarian aid workers has worsened since 2010, highlighting the killing of nine humanitarian aid workers in Gaza by the Israeli military as a significant illustration of this trend (Lillywhite, 2011, p 22). In response to the growing risks faced by humanitarian personnel, The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) identified protection of volunteers as a key priority in humanitarian operations and made it a central issue during the 2011 International Year of the Volunteer (IYV). Violence against humanitarian aid workers has profound consequences, not only causing physical harm and long-term negative psychological effects for those directly affected but also undermines humanitarian operations more broadly. Incidents such as kidnappings divert operational capacity, financial resources and public attention away from the humanitarian objectives, creating additional challenges for humanitarian organizations seeking to effectively respond to the crisis (Lillywhite, 2011, pp 23).

National and local organizations have endured the most extreme impacts of the conditions in the areas of operation and the financial aid crisis (OCHA, 2026, p 5). With lack of funding, resources and personnel, the access and safety for humanitarian aid workers have been restricted and declined severely. Without compromising the impartiality of humanitarian actors, data must be collected and shared to enforce and increase respect for humanitarian principles. Sustainable funding is essential

for this intel gathering, along with security measures, equipment, training and negotiations, which should be possible with better coordination of available funding in addition to acquiring more money (*EEAS*, 2021, p 3). The phenomenon of underreporting creates security concerns and decreasing protection measures related to information sharing. Data are not reporting the full numbers of attacks against humanitarian aid workers because of these factors (*EEAS*, 2021, p 2). There need to be an increase in accessibility, inclusivity and availability to local actors. To help achieve this goal, there should be capacity building and systematic, comprehensive and collaborative data sharing of relevant stakeholders. Comprehensive training and better alert systems can help identify trends and direct relevant policies in their quest to create reliable and sustainable safety and systems of access to relevant areas (*EEAS*, 2021, p 3).

An example by Lillywhite of operating in a safer way, is making humanitarian organizations of similar identities or cultural background of the area of conflict the central actors in the operation. These NGOs could make the westernization complex of humanitarian action shrink, while the “real” image of humanitarian action and its tasks are being perceived as the way it is meant to: actors providing aid for all people. While this approach of heiring local guards and workers while managed remotely has helped in some areas of conflict, it has not reduced overall risk. In some places the threat has even increased as the local workers are easier targets and can easily be perceived as sided with the authority *de facto* in control of the area (Lillywhite, 2011, p 24). While humanitarian aid workers all have a common goal, there is an important distinction between international and national aid workers. The frontline workers are often the ones most at risk, but 90% of the attacked individuals in one of the deadliest years for humanitarian personnel, 2023, were nationals in the areas of conflict, who still remain the least protected (Protect Aid Workers, n.d.).

Gaza constitutes the deadliest context for the humanitarian aid workers and the people receiving aid and consequently need all resources they can get. The total death toll of aid workers in Gaza reached 500 during June 2025 with an increase in both death by shelling and aerial bombardment, and severe increase in gunfire victims (Humanitarian Outcome, 2025, p 5). From 7 October 2023 until June 2026, there has been large numbers of humanitarian aid workers killed. Only from UNRWA has almost 400; 391 aid workers been killed (UNRWA, 2026). Since the beginning of the war until May 2026 there has been 974 incidents impacting the people and premises within UNRWA areas with nearly all being impacted in some way by incidents related to armed conflict (UNRWA, 2026). This trend already started in fact in the 1990s along with the beginning of

disregard for international humanitarian law in conflict zones, which also marked the start of targeting relief personnel and civilians (Hansen, 2004, p 151).

Secretary General Ban Ki-moon presented in 2010 two types of threats against humanitarian aid workers. One kind of incidents were an extension of violence against the civilian population, while the other kind of incident were targeted attacks. In the second type of threat, humanitarian aid workers are politically targeted and attacked by armed groups or extremists. The increase in attacks is worsening as disinformation campaigns by extremists urges violence against aid workers and humanitarian actors. The trend has escalated by terrorist groups conducting propaganda campaigns against the UN, which since 1998 has escalated into an international conspiracy. In this conspiracy, the UN and other humanitarian organizations are seen as “conspiring” against one side and supporting the opposite side of the conflict. The humanitarian actors and the UN are thus perceived both as a Western power and someone supporting their enemy. The principle of neutrality is increasingly seen as broken or compromised (Lillywhite, 2011, p 23).

Spreading of disinformation and misinformation are one of the driving factors, cultivating polarization between communities and undermining trust in humanitarianism and the efforts of humanitarian aid workers and actors (OCHA, 2026, p 5). A Red Cross Review mentions that in Gaza, “The repercussions are serious, with aid deliberately restricted, humanitarian workers targeted and killed, and selective narratives subsequently deployed within the media to justify these actions. Biased reporting, fake news and misinformation significantly distort how humanitarian actors are perceived and thus their ability to act effectively in accordance with their principles” (Brubacker, Bennett & Eriksen, 2024, p 1105). The emergence of social media has revolutionized the reception, distribution and production of content, which has influenced audience behavior and can be used to impose ways of perceiving reality (Górka, 2024, p 162).

Following the Arab Spring, social media has become an essential part of the military in armed conflict, fueling propaganda. Both Israel and Hamas are using social media to enhance their ideas and sides of the conflict. Israel uses it to portray Hamas as the aggressor as well as deny accusation of attacks on civilians. Hamas is using brutal images of civilian casualties to draw international attention to actions by Israeli authorities and military. As Israel has extensive experience within information warfare, are supported by specialized spokespeople and have a military unit in psychological warfare, they have an advantage using social media. Israel is using their platform to reinforce their image as the only democracy in the Middle East, while media content from Hamas is

often flagged as anti-Semitic, unreliable or propaganda because of their few media outlets and their status as a terrorist organization (Górka, 2024, p 168).

When discussing the safety of humanitarian aid workers, the perception of the aid workers by belligerent parties to a conflict as well as the civilian population is essential. In addition to the question about impartiality, the image as a whole is very important. In 2004, the weakening of the meaning of humanitarian language has had, and continues to have, negative effects. In many conflicts, like in Afghanistan, the Afghan political scene saw the international humanitarian actors as back-up troops to Western values, actors and intervention forces. The humanitarian aid organizations naturally find it hard claiming they are complete outsiders to the conflict when the symbol they carry is used to defend occupation or an armed offensive. Taliban then believed MSF worked for “American interests” and not as the neutral aid organization they are (Weissman, 2004, p 2). Israel has also through media strategies deliberately spread propaganda directed at the West, which has played a key role in promoting their global image. They have invested millions of dollars in social media to shape their image and promote the legitimacy of the war in Gaza, using and buying support from NGOs, influencers and universities (Górka, 2024, p 170). Israel used media strategies to manipulate facts and withdrew their testimony where they admitted to the assassination of Muhammad al-Dura, a symbol of the Second Intifada, and managed to push a narrative exonerating them from any guilt (Górka, 2024, p 169).

Humanitarianism is perceived in different ways by different actors and people. Israel is not the only part that have perceived humanitarianism as something western. There has been debates amongst Palestinians as well about the impact of NGO-based development initiatives and UNRWA support to refugees where they question if there is an ulterior, sinister motive to humanitarian intervention. In an interview conducted by Fledman, a Gazan commented; “Western imperialism made us beggars in order to remain weak and stop fighting Israel. Was it really out of pity for Palestinian people? No, there was an aim behind this. What was the aim? That the Palestinian forget his homeland since he takes the flour sack” (Feldman, 2009, p 28). Skepticism is thus spreading on both sides.

Lack of communication and thus confusion between humanitarian organizations and occupation forces can encourage acts of violence directed towards aid actors (Weissman, 2004, p 3).

Insecurities, confusion and uncertainty can also strategically be used to justify means and actions. Khan (2004) argued the Israeli government used the missile attacks the US conducted on Yemen

against suspects of Al Qaeda, as justifying means for some of their targeted attacks against Palestinians in Gaza. Clarity of the humanitarian symbol, with all its meanings and promises, is essential, though clearly not an absolute security as it is prone to miscommunication or disrespect. International humanitarian aid, by nature, have no enemies. To keep it this way, humanitarian organizations should not be involved in conducting a legal or just war, they must remain humanitarians only (Weissman, 2004, p 3).

Humanitarian aid has been politicized with violence against humanitarian aid workers consequently. An approach mentioned by Lillywhite to empower the humanitarian image and conduct operations in a safer way, was to empower or establish a neutral international organization to assume responsibility for, or take over, the delivery of aid. A new emblem, new organization, new hope with a strictly neutral aid organization. Problems with this establishment, however, would be of legal and political nature. Establishing new treaty law and international acknowledgement, as well as the practical nature regarding enforcement, approach to combatants and interaction with the local population and legal or de facto authority of said area, are no easy task, and there are no guarantees this would be different than what we are experiencing now (Lillywhite, 2011, p 24).

The increasing threat around the principles 1) how to stay, 2) no program without security and 3) no security without resources, is daunting. However, the missions must go on and the types of security strengthening these principles can be discussed. Another example from Lillywhite as to how to operate in a safer way, is militarizing aid. Although, armed protection does not quite express stabilization, safety or provide a non-threatening exterior (Lillywhite, 2011, p 24). The trend of militarization of humanitarian aid delivery systems began a long time ago. After World War II, personnel within armed forces needed to expand their tasks in their quest to reconstruct Europe. Furthermore, with few NGOs and UN just creating their humanitarian delivery system, military assistance was a necessity, which is a different situation than the one we are in today (Weiss, 2001, p 213).

In 2021, the *EEAS* underlined the importance of collecting more comprehensive data on attacks against the humanitarian aid workers to indicate the severity of situations and areas in crisis along with tracking trends. Data gathered must be used to “1) inform policymakers in addressing and preventing attacks 2) operationalize situational awareness and security planning and 3) advocate for stronger safety mechanisms” (*EEAS*, 2021, p 2). The security of humanitarian aid workers and correct monitoring both help their safety and data and trend interpretations. While Israeli journalists

have spread false facts and propaganda, Palestinian journalists in Gaza have been reporting on violence and atrocities by Israeli armed forces, making data more accessible, even though they are also struggling with security and targeted attacks (Górka, 2024, p 170).

Humanitarian aid workers are facing increasingly difficult and unsafe situations. Gaza has become one of the deadliest places to operate, and with restricted access, cuts in funding, spreading of misinformation and disinformation in a new world of technology, local citizens and armed groups having disbelief in the aid workers, the concept of neutrality and disrespect for international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles, are some of the factors driving the state of insecurity and unsafe environments for the humanitarian aid workers to operate. There are many suggestions to solutions such as diverting the image of aid away from a Western power appearance, using economic resources and data collection differently, and somehow clear the image of humanitarian aid workers along with a restoration of humanitarian decency and principles. In Gaza, the polarization and physical obstacles are some of the difficulties, further fueled by the Israeli authorities and their specific restrictions against and targeted attacks of humanitarian personnel.

3. Discussion

Drawing lines from the theoretical foundation and legal framework, connected with the empirics applied with the case study of Gaza, I will now discuss the factors that have affected the decline of security for humanitarian aid workers. It can be argued that the decrease of safety for humanitarian aid personnel has gotten worse and more unstable over the years. There are multiple factors from the last decades arguing for a worrying trend towards the work of humanitarian aid personnel. A number of these factors have gotten worse since the 2000s, such as access to areas and people in need, a higher number of civilians and aid workers are subjects for targeted attacks, and the increasing disbelief and mistrust in the neutrality of humanitarian work, organizations, and humanitarian principles in general. What has happened and why is this happening? With Gaza as case, the deterioration of security for aid workers over time is analyzed and discussed. The deterioration of the situation in Gaza is displayed, before analyzing the development of blockades and limited access for humanitarian aid personnel. Following this, further expanding on relevant variables, are factors of economic decline and decreased funding, followed by negative campaigning and the spreading of disinformation and misinformation. This chapter of discussion is concluded with a showcase of the decreasing respect for humanitarian principles, international humanitarian law and increasing questions about neutrality.

There is nothing humane about war. While international humanitarian law tries to make rules and create the idea of a “correct” or humane way of warfare, inhumane ways of warfare are conducted, and people’s lives, innocent civilians’ lives, gets lost. With wars and their consequences raging across the world, the humanitarian aid workers’ responsibility lies more heavily on their shoulders and consciousness, and their actions are impactful and life changing. Humanitarian action is essential. While humanitarians cannot directly end wars, they can reduce civilian suffering significantly. Humanitarian aid workers do not have the responsibility of conducting just wars, only provide their best efforts to reduce its brutal consequences (UNHCR, 2025).

With the four fundamental principles of humanitarian action; humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, humanitarian action is meant to complement and support states in their responsibility of protection of their citizens, especially civilians (UNHCR, 2025). It is an increasingly difficult task and a major responsibility to engage in humanitarian action and provide humanitarian aid in an insecure, changing geopolitical climate and a progressively shrinking humanitarian space. In the last years, when many civilians have been needing it the most, humanitarian aid personnel are struggling to fulfil their tasks, risking both the lives of civilians and their own in their endeavor. The missions conducted and the process of providing aid to areas of occupation have never been completely safe for the aid workers, as they are operating within active conflict zones marked by violence, insecurity and suffering. However, the security for aid personnel has sunken to a lower, more dangerous level during the last decades.

As the *EEAS* report underlined, it is important to collect correct and sufficient data to ensure an effective and professional response by humanitarian aid workers, along with upholding and creating systems ensuring their safety in areas of armed conflict and insecurity. The collection of comprehensive data on attacks against humanitarian personnel can strengthen resource allocation (*EEAS*, 2021, p 2). With funding cuts, and thus lower capacity with fewer resources and personnel within security management and resource allocation and distribution, maybe the situation would be different today if the monitoring, reporting and collection of data had been gathered and acted on in a more efficient and goal-oriented way in the past. The lack of data collection and protection measures has been a difficult task to retrieve and uphold in this relevant area of conflict, Gaza, as it is a dangerous area marked by violence and high tensions.

3.1 The escalating situation in Gaza

The physical space in Gaza has been blocked and restricted, and the humanitarian space has been increasingly shrinking. The essential variable of the shrinking humanitarian space is important to understand why the safety for humanitarian aid workers have declined. It has contributed to the increasing difficulties for humanitarian organizations, actors and personnel to assist during difficult periods for the occupied area. The humanitarian space is meant to be a free space to evaluate needs and to keep having free dialogues with different actors and people impacted by conflicts, wanting to make an impact (Collinson & Elhawary, 2012). After the world order changed in the aftermath of the attacks on the 11th of September 2001, the ability for humanitarian actors to provide protection and relief to affected populations in need has dramatically declined worldwide. Collinson and Elhawary (2012) pointed out the importance of the humanitarian space consisting of neutral support rather than political goals and means. Many of the concerned articles, reviews and research papers concerning shrinking humanitarian space, access and safety for humanitarian aid workers were published in the beginning of the 2000s.

A shift in the humanitarian and geopolitical sphere has been happening and slowly changing for a long time. A number of papers have surrounded the “concerning developing trend” or the “beginning of a trend with lack of respect for international humanitarian law” which then has lasted since the 90s. The Optional Protocol (2005) mentioned the deepening concern of the directed attacks against humanitarian aid workers, and Egeland (2004) emphasized the trend of limited humanitarian access which was a cause for concern if it was not dealt with. The wave of insecurity and concern has been described as “beginning” and developing in recent years as well. However, we can safely say we are not in the beginning of this wave anymore; we are planted deeply within it with continuing, increasingly, negative consequences.

The deteriorating situation in Gaza has been fragile and the civilians have endured a humanitarian crisis for decades, always needing more humanitarian aid than has been granted due to various obstacles. These obstacles have both been physical, like actual blockades set out by Israeli authorities, and been problems of facilitation due to budget cuts and lacking capacities, and problems like insecurities and mistrust amongst the population and in relation to aid agencies. The signing of the Oslo Accords marked a shift in the troubling relationship between Israel and Palestinian authorities. As Hassan (2010) explained, the Oslo Accords began as a turbulent but hopeful agreement with some faith in restoring relationships and hope for a steadier future. After a short period of calmness, the situation deteriorated. Not long after the signing, the Israeli authorities

began taking and acquiring more control, eventually invading the OPT. The Israeli government continued with a disregard for international humanitarian law, which further increased with their policies severely restricting the rights of Palestinian citizens.

Feldman (2009) agrees and establishes the election of Hamas in 2007 and the second intifada in the early 2000s as factors contributing to the deteriorating the conditions in Gaza. The need for a humanitarian response due to the Israeli restrictions of refugees returning home, blockades of Gaza territory and military tactics like violent assaults, was huge and resulted in Gaza reaching new levels of depredation since the humanitarian crisis in 1948. Based on the facts outlined in the case-chapter, the beginning of the 2000s can be seen as a marking of a new era of worsening humanitarian conditions.

In the beginning of the 2000s, there were multiple events happening cross the globe, along with the increasingly shrinking humanitarian space, which motivated the creation and establishment of the Optional Protocol (2005). The protocol is concerned with the directed attacks on humanitarian aid workers, which emerged and developed rapidly. The need for a specific protocol protecting some of the many forms of violence and violations of the security and safety for humanitarian aid workers, were suddenly more in the spotlight. It has never been completely safe to work within the diverse and insecure field of humanitarian action, or as relief personnel who provide aid to people in crisis with aid in areas of armed conflict. Violence and insecurity within this field are not only factors impacting the civilians, it also directly impacts the outcomes of the efforts of relief personnel, along with their personal physical and mental safety. Two months before the attack on October 7th 2023; in August 2023, there was already a crisis in many socioeconomic aspects of daily life in Gaza, including lack of essential goods, such as electricity, food and water (UNRWA, 2023). The territory in crisis has been inflicted by acts of conflict and violence for decades, but the armed attacks and deteriorating humanitarian situation escalated severely after the attacks in 2023. The humanitarian crisis became targeted and personal.

The high numbers of killed, kidnapped and violated humanitarian aid workers have accelerated, and the casualties are not merely consequences of the war. One of the highest numbers of aid workers killed worldwide, has been in Gaza (UNRWA, 2026). The specific attacks targeting humanitarian aid workers has influenced the escalating situation in Gaza and the Middle East; further fueling insecurities, tensions, polarization and a fear of foreign actors which makes aid more difficult to provide and general tensions in the area more alert.

The shrinking humanitarian space makes the negative escalation of conflict, violence and insecurity even more dangerous. The contested humanitarian space is experiencing shrinking as its function is deteriorating. Respect for the principles within International Humanitarian Law, including providing impartial humanitarian organizations access to areas and people in need, and uphold dignity and support for vulnerable civilians, is essential to create a safe and free humanitarian space (Collinson & Elhawary, p 1, 2012). The lack of this respect is becoming an increasing problem, which makes the room for operations even more restricted, and thus makes impartial humanitarian operations harder to carry out. The ability to operate in a safe space is not the only factor at risk. As Collinson & Elhawary (2012) highlighted, the humanitarian space also creates an arena for free discussions and the possibility to uphold civil conversations between warring parties. As the situation in the Middle East is deteriorating and the humanitarian space is further shrinking, the possibilities for free and open humanitarian dialogues and actions are disappearing with it.

The world is experiencing increasing polarization, both between different communities and neighboring countries characterized by different cultures, religions or historical background, and between the Global South and the West. The escalations in the Middle East and in Gaza is fueled by a wide array of insecurities and tensions, both within the conflict zones, between Israel and Hamas, but also against foreign actors. Polarization can make people more secure in their own opinions and create mechanisms to dehumanize the enemy, especially in situations of armed conflict. This is making both sides more extreme against each other, but the skepticism towards the West is also a factor. Both sides are prone to think the Western aid actors are not to trust. They are perceiving them as foreigners not knowing about the situation, operating with a white-savior complex, or they are not to trust because they are believed to be supporting the enemy. Humanitarian aid organizations are thus trying to help in situations where they are perceived as foreigners or as actors on the enemy side, which makes the security decrease severely, as the humanitarian aid personnel cannot know where they are welcome, wanted or safe to carry out their operations. When the physical situation in Gaza is deteriorating with an increased skepticism towards the aid workers, the limited access is a factor making the already hard situation and shrinking humanitarian space harder to operate within.

3.2 Blockades and limited access

After the election of Hamas within the OPT in 2007, Israeli authorities intensified their restrictions on the corridors allowing a flow of goods and resources throughout the naval- and airspace. These restrictions were in addition to a stricter closure of the borders. This was both seen as a punishment

towards the Palestinian people for electing Hamas, and more importantly, to contain the second intifada in the early 2000s. While the Israeli authorities denied there was a severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza, Feldman (2009) pointed out they were arguing that they were motivated to facilitate humanitarian solutions for the welfare of the population. Contradictory, they were severely restricting and hindering essential resources to support the people in Gaza, to a large extent. The variable of restricted humanitarian access has inflicted the safety for the population and for the humanitarian aid workers. The number of people requiring aid in Gaza was already at the high percentage of 63% before the election, and it increased to over 80% being dependent on humanitarian aid in the aftermath of the victory.

With the new and stricter rules, Feldman (2009) introduced another imposition of severe restrictions on movement for the Palestinian population, making the number of people crossing the border to work in Israel decline from multiple thousands every day, to zero. The border closure was not only for Palestinians, also for humanitarian actors trying to access the struggling area and civilians in need, and many now without jobs. The lack of access to resources and life-saving aid along with the Palestinian populations' inability to acquire the resources themselves, made the situation for the civilians deteriorate further. Furthermore, the situation for the humanitarian aid workers started deteriorating at the same time; after the second intifada. The Israeli blockades were not only to keep aid out, it also both kept aid personnel out and kept the aid personnel already within the borders in a more vulnerable situation.

The acts that can be argued as unlawful of Israeli authorities and Hamas, are destroying life and land areas. One of the most significant problems with humanitarian aid delivery in Gaza, is the blockades and barricading the Israeli authorities and military has established to make sure the assistance is not delivered. This is illegal. As Mackintosh (2007) shows; an Occupying Power must agree to relief schemes accessing the area and people in need in accordance with article 59 of the Geneva Convention IV. When an occupied territory, like the OPT, is poorly supplied, the Occupying Power must facilitate them by all means possible. This article is not only ignored by Israeli authorities, but heavily worked against both with physical barriers and by targeting the aid resources and aid personnel directly to hinder deliveries of necessary aid.

UNRWA (2026) is one of the few external international organizations who has had a large volume of aid workers within Gaza, as many humanitarian actors operating within the area are from local organizations or consists of personnel from the area. However, as a consequence of a law the Israeli

parliament passed in October 2024, no UNRWA personnel are permitted to enter OPT. UNRWA operations are thus prohibited within territories of Israeli control or interpreted authority. As UNRWA (2026) has reported, multiple of the UNRWA buildings, premises, vehicles and resources are deliberately attacked. Their humanitarian aid personnel are being blocked out, kidnapped or killed. These are fully targeted attacks and restrictions, as Israeli authorities have made laws and blockades specifically for UNRWA.

Since March 2025, Israeli authorities have blocked UNRWA from bringing humanitarian aid and personnel into Gaza. The consequences that followed has been severe, as the blockades are hindering other humanitarian organizations as well, creating a crisis of low levels of essential resources like food, water and fuel to access the area. UNRWA, and other humanitarian organizations, has tons of life-saving aid such as food, water, medical supplies and fuel waiting outside Gaza, with enough supplies for hundreds of thousands of people. However, the aid organizations are not permitted to deliver the goods to the civilians or aid workers within Gaza, who are all suffering from malnutrition, dehydration and the diseases that follow. Because of the almost total blockade and the direct prohibition on providing and delivering food, the bases of UNRWA within Gaza ran out of food and they have not been able to replenish through the very few points of entry. Critical food assistance has been provided for over two million people during their situation of ceasefire in the short period in 2025. This shows their possible extensive reach and exemplifies how severe their restrictions are affecting all people, civilians, combatants and aid workers, within the borders of Gaza.

The effects of the blocked aid and restricted areas are severe, and the security for humanitarian aid workers has rapidly declined after the implementation of the new Israeli restriction scheme in 2025. Weakened and starving civilians are along with the aid workers walking on dangerous and difficult trails towards militarized distribution sites with very few single-entry points to access food. As INSO (2025) reported, are the aid distribution points are surrounded by the effects of armed conflict. Several massacres by the distribution points have taken place, and the trails to get there are chaotic, violent and long and difficult to walk. There are no resources and no capability to facilitate the humanitarian aid personnel or secure the area of aid distribution, which is resulting in both civilian and aid worker deaths and injuries. The number of untouched medical supplies, water, food and fuel are spiking along with numbers of death by dehydration and starvation when relief has not reached a significant number of people.

The number of people being driven to displacement by the Israeli government are also hard to reverse as the blockades are impossible to get through. UNRWA is helping Palestinian refugees in any way they can and is de facto not impartial. However, they exist to help resourceless and vulnerable civilians, without any military capabilities or threats. With fear of dual-use and in accordance with strict security measures, Israel has argued there are resources to be hindered for this reason. To keep UNRWA out of Gaza is however not beneficial for the Israeli authorities in a military sense, only political to spread fear, misery and showcase and exercise control. In their restriction of UNRWA workers, and with Israeli military and authorities targeting and attacking their personnel, UNRWA has one of the highest numbers of aid workers killed throughout the conflict, and one of the highest numbers across the world.

Both vital resources and humanitarian staff are reliant on safe transport and passage to get into the areas of conflict and need. With the global aid funding disintegrating, the safer ways of travel and transport is no longer an option. Humanitarian Outcomes (2025) has consequently reported less flights arriving directly in designated, safer areas, and observed an increase in transport of resources and personnel by vehicles who need to use specific roads and routes to travel to their stations and areas of operation. Military personnel under Israeli authorities have memorized their only optional travel routes and deliberately ambushed relief vehicles to confiscate resources and kidnap or kill the humanitarian aid workers. The safe passages and ways of delivering aid is fading. This is not only affecting the aid access to the recipients who are not receiving the lifesaving relief they sorely need, but thus also pose a direct danger for the humanitarian aid workers who are travelling unsafely. With a large share of ambushes happening on the roads of transport in clearly marked aid vehicles, this is an unfortunate development reflecting the decrease of respect for aid workers. As these attacks are getting more predictable, as the awareness of this problem is getting higher, the decrease of security measures is also exhibited.

To ensure protection and uphold high standards of safety for humanitarian aid workers, security measures must be extensive, and their capacity must be facilitated and stay updated. Another reason for the decrease in safety for humanitarian aid workers, is thus underdeveloped security measures who are lacking capacity. *EEAS* (2021) emphasizes the severely importance of the field of data gathering and reporting to understand the severity of incidents and situations, and what must be prioritized and made public to gain attention and possibly funding. This field is however experiencing a phenomenon of underreporting, where current data is not updated or reported in necessary ways. This is largely because of the limited access and dangerous zones of operation.

Security concerns and protection measures related to information sharing is not complete, and the reporting of incidents violating international humanitarian law, including the complete number of attacks against humanitarian aid workers, are not sufficiently or comprehensively reported.

The limited access along with consequently restricted collaboration with, and specific security measures for, local humanitarian actors has become a huge problem. After reports in 2021, it became clear that more specific measures need to be issued for the sake of data gathering, intel and the security of humanitarian, especially local, personnel (*EEAS*, 2021). Comprehensive and systematic data gathering is important to enhance capacity building, preparatory training, and better alert systems, which again can identify trends and stay ahead with security measures. The early inclusion of stakeholders is also essential to try and enhance security, accessibility and availability to local actors.

The knowledge of the local aid workers and their way of working is essential to understand the context of the area and the conflict. In Gaza, there are mostly local actors and organizations operating within the borders, with the exception of UNRWA (2026). The amount of local personnel operating in Gaza is largely a consequence of the limited access to the area, due to rules and laws issued by Israeli authority and their physical blockades, and the fact that it is not safe for the personnel to operate. This limits to a large extent international field workers, who not only come with new energy, support, resources and supplies to people in dire need, but also constitute important witnesses reporting back to the outside world of the devastating conditions in the area. It also reflects the long-standing and increasing trend to use and facilitate aid workers within the relevant territories. This often includes and means personnel with the same nationality as the relevant area of operation.

While the limited access and the blockades are both establishing physical restrictions on aid delivery and facilitating aggression and violence against the aid workers, there are other problems faced by the humanitarian aid personnel which influences their lack of safety. OCHA (2026) has described the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East in general as one of the factors severely limiting access for humanitarian aid workers. There are significant disruptions to the global humanitarian supply chains because of the insecurities and armed conflict across the Middle East, delaying and stopping deliveries across borders. The emergency relief attempting to reach Gaza is thus limited not merely because of the Israeli restrictions and blockades, but also all other conflicts in the area. The corridors and maritime chokepoints the humanitarian supply chains are using across

the region are facing such insecurities preventing resources like fuel, fertilizer and energy reaching where needed. Global inflations are also affected and fueled by these insecurities and armed violence. The already expensive and insufficient markets of goods and resources are thus increasing in their high prices on life essential resources with the global inflation. Inflation and general problems of funding are thus making it hard for the humanitarian aid organizations to send anyone anywhere and properly facilitate all stages of aid delivery to civilians in need, while ensuring their aid personnel is safe.

3.3 Economic decline and its consequences

Global inflation and insecurities are creating disruptions to supply chains, which together with general decline of financial support to humanitarian organizations from funding agencies, is making humanitarian aid work increasingly difficult. Funding cuts and economic decline is thus an essential variable to understand how the safety for humanitarian aid workers has declined. On a basis from the literature, we can observe that problems and difficulties regarding the financing of aid have created severe difficulties both for the decisions of, and the implementing of, aid access and delivery. The underfunding of aid has created critical situations, and the cuts are having more impactful as it happens on a larger scale, affecting both important actors delivering aid and the people in desperate need for it. In accordance with the overview of financial response plans to assist and support the communities within the Middel East, there is a very low percentage of the planned funding, called for by the international community, which in reality has been funded. The planned funding overview for the OPT shows a low budget where only 7% of the already low sum is in fact funded. Comparing to the total of people in desperate need of aid and the existing difficulties in the delivery of aid, this is far from enough (OCHA, 2026).

In the beginning of the 2000s, Khan (2004) pointed out the importance of funding to humanitarian organizations and called for more economic resources earmarked to their operations and security. Already in 2004, she mentioned the need for a better structure, organized distribution, more money and new funds to accomplish a reorienting of the security agenda towards human security and human rights. Large investments and commitment by governments, financial institutions, business leaders, civil society and the international community were needed in the early 2000s to accomplish this. Acquiring funds to reorient the security agenda to also meet social needs of poor and marginalized communities, and to help areas in deep crisis seemed like the reprioritizing issue at the time. Today we see how it turned out to be a harder quest than predicted, as the cuts in funding has been exponential and the problem of securing financial aid is more serious than ever.

Financial aid and funding are decreasing along with the world economy experiencing a backlash. As a result, important actors are pulling economic resources from humanitarian action programs. These cuts are happening worldwide and is one of the essential factors as to why humanitarian aid cannot be delivered and ensured with the same security and on the same scales as earlier. Reports from Humanitarian Outcomes (2025) has displayed how the general program closures and aid downsizing has been a problem for years. The number of people laid off, and program closures has drastically increased, while financial assistance to both international and local agencies providing relief to areas of conflict and crisis, have decreased. When Donald Trump decided to freeze assets and shut down USAID, these consequences grew exponentially. The closure of USAID has inflicted the aid workers, aid recipients and the standards of a high operational level, technical expertise and professional training, which is essential to conduct effective aid work. Funding cuts have thus compromised the operational security, especially for the remaining local humanitarian actors. They are left in contested areas of increasing risk and threat, abandoned by resources, financial means and international aid workers. In Gaza, the local aid workers must protect civilians, the aid recipients, with minimal resources, along with themselves without reliable security measures.

Even if the funding cuts and problems of securing sufficient financial aid has been an issue across the humanitarian sector before the closure of USAID, it did drastically contribute to the deterioration. This is because USAID was an empire of aid and support. Humanitarian Outcomes (2025) introduces the USA as the backbone of the international humanitarian aid system as a humanitarian donor who has represented over a third of aid contributions over the last decades. It included much of the data assets and analysis, which we have seen is an essential part of humanitarian support, both as a reporting tool and for further prediction and facilitation. USAID also endorsed a large part of coordination, assessments, logistics and transport during diverse aid projects. The lack of reporting and decline in coordination had severe implications in Gaza. When USAID froze its assets, the global response capacity unraveled consequently as other significant humanitarian donors cut their fundings as well. This happened either as an influential result when the whole structure of the aid system changed, or as a direct result, as USAID endorsed and cooperated with other organizations.

The remaining donors have crumbled under pressure deciding which organizations to support and which areas in crisis to prioritize. Fröhlich (2018) has narrowed down some reasons as to why the aid structures has changed. More severe security threats, deep polarization and multiple political,

economic, social and cultural challenges are some of them. The sector of security risk management for humanitarian aid operations has developed in the last decades as a machine of specialized technical function. It has become critical to provide humanitarian access and resources in areas of severe crisis and conflict. The funding needed to ensure secure operations and access is costly with reliance on transport, training facilitation and maintaining, equipment for communication, facilities and the production of skilled personnel. The decrease in the functionality of these essential factors in Gaza has made the security situation for the humanitarian aid workers worse. The loss of funding has produced the risk of a fallback to when security and risk management was not an essential part of decisions or operations but rather an afterthought (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025).

The variable of funding cuts is vital when analyzing the safety of aid workers. The economic decline within the humanitarian sector along with less money distributed to, and the prioritizing of, security within humanitarian operations, has led to a decline in safety for humanitarian aid workers. Financial difficulties with funding cuts got worse after the essential change in the global system with the freeze of USAID. With less money to security measures, the situation in Gaza has deteriorated further, and made it difficult to make necessary changes to ensure access and safety. There is a final variable I have deemed as a cause for the intense decrease in safety for humanitarian aid workers, spreading through notions of insecurities and mistrust.

3.4 Negative campaigning

Humanitarian action is not only a responsibility, but a protected responsibility, that unfortunately is under pressure and decreasingly respected by important actors in armed conflict. As the world situation is changing and worsening, it is severely important with functional humanitarian action within areas in need. To achieve this, trust must be established. However, many are deliberately spreading mistrust and conducting negative campaigning to construct a negative image of humanitarian aid workers. This to make the population and both parts of the conflict work against the humanitarian personnel, either deliberately so the other side does not get aid, or because of misbelieve and misunderstandings. This trend has gotten worse over the years, especially along with new and creative ways of communicating and spreading information with the technological developments of the 21st century. The variable of negative campaigning is thus important to explore, to be able to explain how the safety for humanitarian aid workers have declined over time.

The notions of mistrust and fueling insecurities are dangerous, especially in the last decade, as it has become much easier and more common with newer technology and the emergence of social media.

Humanitarian agencies used social media originally as a tool incentivizing public relations and creating a platform for fundraising. Hence, its potential as a strategic online information environment was not exploited or understood in the beginning. Soon, it became clear, however, that social media is an essential tool either to defend acceptance and humanitarian principles, or work against them. Understanding the power of social media is particularly important to protect the humanitarian space in the 21st century. Hostile narratives toward humanitarian principles, organizations and personnel have emerged through the fueling of mistrust, polarization and disinformation campaigns. As Humanitarian Outcomes (2025) emphasizes, it is our collective responsibility to conduct proactive social media monitoring in our engagement. Górka (2024) explained how both Israel and Hamas have used social media to influence the international community. Hamas by sharing extreme pictures from the conflict, and Israel by portraying Hamas as the aggressor in the conflict, along with using their military unit on psychological warfare to spread propaganda.

OCHA reports (2026) have shown that the spreading of disinformation and misinformation is one of many factors undermining trust in communities and belief in humanitarianism. The cultivating of this trend is further undermining the efforts of humanitarian aid workers and can nurture polarization between communities and between aid personnel and citizens. The continuation of, and increase in, dissemination of disinformation and misinformation is happening within a political landscape of insecurities and low funding for the aid agencies to monitor the trends. Israel uses their platform to reinforce their image as the only democracy in the Middle East, spreading disinformation explaining their own innocence and an anti-Semitic notion by Hamas (Górka, 2024).

Spreading of disinformation is impacting security measures, which are further deteriorating the situation of poor access and safety for the humanitarian personnel. Negative campaigning and deliberate spread of false information has been a relevant factor for decades, a tactic used to justify own actions or purely to spread mistrust. As Humanitarian Outcomes (2025) clarifies, the age of social media has further deteriorated the problem. Skepticism has evolved and social media is no longer a tool of merely fundraising and for organizations to stay visible in public relations; it has become a tool of power. Recruiting people to specific causes, organizations or ways of observing and judging events, situations, humanitarian actors or the world, has become easier. The manipulation of content has further enabled this trend. Social media has also been used to spread news and information about events. Israel has used media to portray situations from their point of view, justifying kidnappings or killings by their own explanations rather than by evidential

information. This is more commonly “accepted” within our modern era marked by intense and constant flows of information in media. Górka (2024) explains how Israel has used social media as an extensive part of their military operations, spreading of propaganda and promote their role internationally by spreading false information.

There has been an ongoing trend for decades of decreasing humanitarianism, guilt, ethics and compassion for fellow human beings. The lack of respect for human lives, decency and law has many points in time taken a turn for the worse. Further cultivation by extremists spreading disinformation and launching propaganda campaigns is further deteriorating the situation. Lillywhite (2011) displays how the few can reach the many, and amongst them are vulnerable people, either because of lack of education, increase in insecurity and fear living in difficult situations, or people having a hard time navigate the swarm of information in a space of inconsistency. Extremists and multiple armed groups gets substantial attention from and can try and control people living within unsafe areas. When citizens of an area in conflict are unsure who to trust, the negative narrative of unsafe foreigners or personnel from mentioned NGOs, coming into their territory, being on the side of the enemy is an easy one to portray. Humanitarian aid workers are thus being portrayed and treated as targets in themselves.

In a political landscape filled with insecurities and strong opposing opinions, negative campaigning and selective narratives used in media can significantly impact how citizens and actors are perceiving humanitarian actors. Brubacker, Bennett & Eriksen (2024) explains the factors of fake news, bias reporting and the spread of disinformation and misinformation as restricting the ability of aid workers to effectively act in accordance with their humanitarian principles and goals. The spreading of disinformation and misinformation is however not the only reason there is existing skepticism towards humanitarian aid agencies and personnel. Humanitarian Outcomes (2025) shows how the humanitarian aid agencies and governments supporting them or campaigning for their cause, is often providing public communications with overly diplomatic and top-down language. This can further support the narrative of the organizations acting as foreign western powers who perceive themselves as “above” the recipient countries.

History shows a significant pattern of colonization and has left heavy Western-led intervention footprints, which can argue the increased targeting of western humanitarian aid workers is a predictable consequence. Collinson and Elhawary (2012) argues the complex history of countries suffering as a consequence of Western interventions, which naturally has generated a pattern of

hostilities and violence against Western actors, organizations, institutions and people. Within and between the aid organizations, there has also been turbulence in their cooperation. Local aid structures and institutions have in some places been overrun and marginalized by international agencies who has taken control of the decision-making processes and implementations in areas they do not fully understand. Some key personnel have also been recruited by the international organizations, undermining the local capacities and inflicted Western values, interests and systems on the communities. This can create a perception for local communities of aid as a Western construct, which then easily can be distrusted or rejected by the local population. Israel is using their social media platforms to spread false information about their status to the West and the international community. Israel is both using the power of influencers or universities as endorsers to try and promote themselves and have invested millions of dollars to do so. They are also spreading information to their population and military, making the security situation within the humanitarian sector threatening for humanitarian aid personnel (Górka, 2024).

Limiting or contradicting the narrative portraying humanitarian aid agencies and workers as something foreign, brought into the situation and area as Western powers, could help reduce the general feeling of insecurity against humanitarian aid workers. Humanitarian Outcomes (2025) suggests clearer mediation and direct community engagement, with clear messages as essential to try and sustain acceptance. This also to counter the spread of both misinformation and disinformation within the increasingly contested operational area. Both international and local aid workers are unsafe in situations of conflict, experiencing an increase in targeted attacks. The trend of increasing fear of the foreign, Western and unknown international aid workers is thus not the whole reason why the safety for humanitarian actors and workers are deteriorating. Negative campaigning and spreading of disinformation are though factors and a variable explaining one of the many reasons why safety for humanitarian aid workers has deteriorated. Lack of trust and fueling insecurity are strong factors as to why they are targeted, especially when the belligerent sides of the conflict are sure the agencies are only there to help the enemy. Both parties to the conflict are also using social media as an active tool to undermine each other, promote themselves, and in the case of Israel; spread disinformation about their actions or reasons behind their actions in Gaza, also impacting the security for aid workers (Górka, 2024).

3.4.1 Decreasing respect towards humanitarian organizations

To maintain a safe environment of action within the shrinking humanitarian space, it is essential that both humanitarian and non-humanitarian actors understand their important roles. Combatants

must also do their part of respecting humanitarian principles to help ensure actions and the development of the conflict is not being conducted at the expense of civilians. Egeland (2004) explains how the humanitarian space by definition is corresponding with international humanitarian law. Hence, the respect for the lives of civilians and humanitarian notions must be included in actions conducted by warring parties. Already in 2011, Lillywhite (2011) mentioned issues of trust amongst the population surrounding the neutrality of humanitarian aid workers from recognized organizations like the Red Cross. The variable analyzed in this section, is thus the decreasing respect towards humanitarian organizations and international humanitarian law.

While this problem started a while ago, it has developed into a notion of not only distrust against the organizations and aid personnel, but a hatred that has made the emblems of humanitarian aid organizations and the UN, targets for attack. As IFRC (2026) explains the meaning of the ICRC symbols, there still needs to be extended safety measures as the insignias are not perceived as the neutral, protected symbols and promise of aid for all parties involved anymore. The symbols used to be safety enough, used as a shield for humanitarian aid workers to not be attacked in the field. The sentiment and meaning of the symbols and the organizations they are representing has not changed, though, the perception of them has. The personnel with such symbols are in the areas of conflict to provide their impartial and life-saving aid, but they are no longer perceived in that way by many parts of the conflicts. Why this has changed is hard to say but it is part of the wave of disrespect of human rights, human rights law and human dignity. Is there any substance in this wave or is the belief in human decency and kindness for fellow humans crushed?

Humanitarian aid personnel working in impartial and recognized organizations like the Red Cross or MSF, have one single task within the humanitarian space; aid *all* people in need and with this, protect civilians and others protected under international humanitarian law (IFRC, 2026). Their protection is not contingent on who the people in need are, that is the whole point of an impartial, neutral humanitarian organization. To show their intentions, ICRC uses protected symbols, which was both a good way of showing they were coming into areas of conflict to provide life-saving aid, and that the aid personnel mean no harm. The insignias of Red Cross, the UN, MSF or driving a white aid-vehicle were thus protection for the aid personnel and stopped them from getting attacked in the field of operation. IFRC (2026) explains how the insignias guarantee protection in times of conflict and must stand unchallenged as symbols of neutral assistance.

However, along with the increasing mistrust and insecurity in communities within areas of conflict, the protected aid symbols have largely lost their protective power. The vehicles and people wearing the symbols have slowly not only been disregarded as protected groups or no longer been perceived as important assistance, but they have also become direct targets for attack. The neutrality of organizations such as Red Cross has been questioned increasingly, as belligerent parties are not believing, for a multitude of reasons, that they are operating only with humanitarian principles at heart. Attacks against vehicles, installations and buildings with the protected symbols on them, along with humanitarian aid personnel are systematically occurring. In these attacks, the lack of commitment and respect to international humanitarian law is shown. In Gaza, extensive airstrikes have been the most fatal form of attack, and kidnappings are increasingly happening directly from ambushing vehicles with the protected symbols on them (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025). There has also been many cases of intimidation, extortion and harassment of the aid workers in Gaza, where the Israeli authorities have exploited them as a tool of control, rather than condemning the attacks on them.

Furthermore, one of the most prominent forms of attack displaying the lack of respect for humanitarian law, has been the attacks on aid distribution sites and hospitals. Direct attacks on civilians and aid workers have happened increasingly on the pathway to, and in the areas of, aid distribution, where the individuals do not pose any kind of threat, and are only trying to survive. The events following the new Israeli scheme in 2025 with the reimposing of a near-total blockade on humanitarian aid, has been extreme. Massacres of civilians and aid workers at the very few militarized points of entry in the distribution sites along with incidents of attack along the trails towards the distribution sites has been conducted. As the INSO report (2025) concludes, the humanitarian conditions have further, and in a rapid pace, collapsed. There are a multitude of reasons, but starving civilians not accessing life-necessary aid and them with aid workers being dependent on getting through dangerous zones of violent, chaotic conflict raging to even have a chance of accessing aid, is a few of them.

The notion of a new international symbol has been suggested, or even a new organization, to represent and protect all humanitarian organizations. One of the suggestions is providing a new insignia like the Red Cross is representing, in order to protect everyone who is neutral and works independently. Lillywhite (2011) argue this can be a great solution that would avoid many cases of mistrust; create a complete newfound organization without any history. There are some arguments against this idea, as some think this will be too difficult legally and practically to establish and

maintain in a world where the existing symbols of neutrality and humanitarian aid is no longer applying in the way they used to and are supposed to. They do not see how the practicality and functionality of a new symbol would be any different or help any of the issues we have today. MSF, for example, does not take any funds from any government or political organizations in order to uphold their neutrality among all parties. Still, they are subject to attacks, while providing life-saving medical aid. In Gaza have Israeli forces attacks and destroyed health care and killed health workers, including MSF humanitarian aid workers (Weissman, 2004). Lillywhite (2011) has also suggested a newer way of militarizing aid, to make the field of operation for the aid personnel safer. However, in the principles of humanitarianism and an impartial humanitarian space, it can be difficult to incorporate military cooperation. As militarizing aid does not express stability or create a non-threatening image, it can promote and strengthen the image of humanitarian work as hostile. While some express the upsides to this, further militarization today may not be the safest option.

It has been multiple suggestions like these, and in the literature, many has concluded with contradictory information or ways of thinking. This shows how difficult is to navigate and provide suggestions within this complex area in an everchanging world. It is difficult to understand what the next steps should be to ensure greater safety and security for humanitarian aid workers in a polarizing and volatile world order influenced by insecurities and disrespect for human rights and international humanitarian law. The emergence of social media and thus the spreading of disinformation and misinformation in a wave of negative campaigning is counteracting humanitarian organizations and their workers. The westernization of aid and some problems of cooperation with local organizations is not supporting the narrative of humanitarian organizations as neutral and helpful. It is important for all parties to the conflict to act according to, and respect, humanitarian law and the protected symbols. In Gaza, humanitarian aid workers have instead been targeted, attacked and diminished, making the humanitarian situation more severe and rapidly degrading.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to examine why the safety of humanitarian aid workers is declining in modern conflicts, using Gaza as an illustrative case study. The analysis demonstrates that this decline is complex and cannot be explained by a single factor, but rather by several structural and political developments that have fundamentally transformed the space in which humanitarian organizations operate. The key findings show that one of the most important variables is this shrinking humanitarian space. Humanitarian organizations increasingly operate in environments where principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence are contested rather than respected and followed. As these principles lose status amongst belligerent parties and political actors, humanitarian personnel are no longer consistently recognized as impartial aid providers, but increasingly perceived as strategic actors within the conflict.

A second key variable is the restriction of humanitarian access. Blockades, bureaucratic obstacles, militarized aid delivery systems and deliberate limitations of the movement of humanitarian personnel are not merely preventing life-saving assistance from reaching the civilian populations in need, but also expose aid workers to greater physical danger. The case of Gaza illustrates how restricting access has become intertwined with political and military objectives. Restricted access to aid has shown the potential of transforming humanitarian assistance into an instrument of warfare rather than a protected humanitarian activity.

The research further demonstrates that declining respect for international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles, combined with the politicization of humanitarian aid, significantly weakened the protection of the safety of humanitarian aid workers. Despite legal frameworks prohibiting attacks on aid workers and guaranteeing humanitarian access and assistance, implementation and accountability remain inadequate. The increasing willingness for state- and non-state actors to disregard these important international legal obligations has contributed to an increasing normalization of attacks against humanitarian aid workers.

Economic decline and reduction in funding for humanitarian organizations and operations further constitute another significant variable. Financial cuts have reduced operational capacity, weakened security management systems, limited staff training and data gathering operations. Furthermore, it has forced organizations to scale back aid and international personnel, ultimately relying more heavily on local personnel, who face the greatest security risks. Humanitarian organizations are

being required to operate with fewer resources and reduced international support, to deliver humanitarian assistance to the people most in need.

Finally, the analysis highlights the growing importance of misinformation and disinformation being spread by negative campaigning. Hostile narratives portray humanitarian actors as politically motivated, foreign or western-controlled, or aligned with the opposite side of a conflict, fueling local mistrust. These narratives undermine humanitarian legitimacy and increase the likelihood that aid workers become targets of violence, intimidation and deliberate attacks.

The case of Gaza illustrates how these variables reinforce one another; restricted access, political polarization, financial decline, disinformation and weakening respect for humanitarian principles and law create increasing risks faced by humanitarian aid workers within the shrinking humanitarian space. Although Gaza represents an extreme example, the dynamics identified in this thesis are increasingly observable across contemporary armed conflicts. These variables explaining the declining safety of humanitarian aid workers, are reflecting a broader transformation in the nature of modern warfare. Humanitarian action is contested and the protection of the humanitarian personnel requires stronger security measures and accountability for violations of international humanitarian law. Without addressing these variables, the humanitarian space will continue to shrink, and humanitarian aid workers and civilians will face greater security risks.

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