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Israel, West Bank, and Gaza, Policy and Governance

May 26, 2026

The Politics of Hunger: How Governance and Conflict Drive Food Insecurity in Gaza and the West Bank

On October 7, 2023, the escalation of conflict between Israel and Hamas triggered a humanitarian and economic crisis which then rapidly extended beyond Gaza and into the West Bank. International attention largely focused on military developments, though another crisis simultaneously intensified: food insecurity, which, in Palestine, is not merely the result of insufficient food. It is fundamentally an issue of policy and governance (Palestine Food Security Sector, 2024).

In these regions, damaged infrastructure, mass displacement, and supply shortages pushed thousands of families towards famine-like conditions. While humanitarian aid remains necessary, especially during a time of active conflict, it cannot alone resolve the government failures that continue to destabilise food systems in this area.

Israel has a population of approximately 10 million people, while the population in the West Bank is approximately 3.3 million Palestinians. Gaza has more than 2.1 million residents living within a territory of only 365 square kilometres (World Bank, 2024). Israel is highly urbanised and economically developed, while the West Bank is a combination of urban centres and rural agricultural villages. Gaza is one of the most densely populated territories in the world, with more than 6,000 people per square kilometer.

The climate throughout the region is primarily Mediterranean, with hot dry summers and mild wet winters. However, water scarcity remains a major challenge due to limited freshwater resources, recurring drought conditions, and groundwater depletion. Only a relatively small percentage of land is suitable for cultivation, particularly in Gaza where urban overcrowding and infrastructure construction limit agricultural expansion, and only 1.5 percent of land is arable. (Gaza Strip: 98.5 Percent of Cropland Unavailable for Cultivation as Famine Looms, 2025)

Agriculture nevertheless remains economically and culturally significant throughout Palestinian communities. Major crops include olives, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, citrus fruits, dates, and wheat (Ben-Sheleg et al., 2024). Olive cultivation is especially essential in the West Bank and Gaza because

olive trees represent both economic income and cultural heritage for many Palestinian families. Prior to the escalation of the current conflict, olive oil production generated approximately 5 percent of agricultural income in Palestine (Eldidi, Nehring, Ringler, 2025).

The structure of government throughout the region is politically complex. Israel operates as a parliamentary democracy, while the Palestinian Authority administers parts of the West Bank. Hamas has governed Gaza since 2007 (CIA, the World Factbook, 2026). Israel[cs1] , furthermore, maintains control over many of the borders and crossings separating the territories, as well as routes that affect the movement of Palestinian goods and people, which in turn interferes with humanitarian operations and trade in the area.

One of the clearest examples of governance affecting food systems has been the revocation or suspension of Palestinian permits to access Israel for work. (OCHA, 2026).

For many Palestinian families, these collapsing employment opportunities are further propelling food insecurity. Over 100,000 Palestinians from the West Bank who had previously worked in Israel and Israeli settlements lost their jobs following these tightened restrictions. Furthermore, killings and injury to Palestinians trying to cross the border to Israel for employment has been well documented by The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Combined with economic decline, approximately 132,000 jobs were lost in total by only late 2023, representing 15 percent of employment in the West Bank (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2026). These losses significantly reduced household purchasing power and access to food.

Furthermore, settler violence and restricted access zones have prevented farmers from safely reaching agricultural land. According to the FAO, 90.3 percent of olive groves remain inaccessible, damaged, and/or unharvested following the escalation of conflict (FAO, 2025). Consequently, Palestinian farmers lost approximately 1,200 metric tons of olive oil production, causing an estimate of 10 million USD in direct economic losses (OHCHR, 2024).

Additionally, policies restricting transportation and movement have weakened food supply chains and increased food prices throughout Gaza and the West Bank. There has been an introduction of checkpoints, road closures, and border restrictions that have delayed the transportation of crops, livestock feed, and necessary humanitarian aid. Because of this, food availability declines while operational costs increase, resulting in reduced quality of diet in households.

Repeated military operations have damaged irrigation systems, electrical grids, roads, and water pipelines throughout Gaza. These electricity shortages affect refrigeration, rendering food spoiled and inedible. Many areas of Gaza receive electricity for only limited periods each day depending on fuel availability.

Water governance has become another critical factor affecting food security. There has been an over extraction of groundwater, sewage contamination, and infrastructure damage that has left more than 90 percent of Gaza’s groundwater unsafe for drinking.

Although the World Food Programme and UNRWA have expanded emergency food assistance programs, governance barriers limit their effectiveness. These agencies additionally face severe funding shortages that limit the scale of their agricultural recovery and humanitarian aid programs.

These obstacles demonstrate the fact that food insecurity in this region is not based merely on scarcity. It is inextricably tied to the political instability in the area and the governance systems regulating mobility, humanitarian operations, and agricultural access.

Because governance failures are central to the food security crisis, solutions must focus on policy reform and a recovery of institutions rather than a reliance on emergency aid. One major recommendation is the establishment of a protected, internationally monitored agricultural access framework. With this framework,, Palestinian farmers would receive guaranteed access to farmland during planting and harvest periods. This recommendation addresses one of the largest driving factors of food insecurity in the area: the lack of consistent, reliable access to agricultural land. Current permit systems are issued only temporarily, and they are often revoked upon periods of escalation (Mandraud, 2025). As a result, it becomes nearly impossible to plan agriculturally long-term.

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Unlike short-term humanitarian interventions designed to respond *after* agricultural losses occur, an Agricultural Access Agreement would institutionalise agricultural protections on a government level. This predictable access to farmland would then stabilise income in rural households, preserve food production locally, and reduce dependence on imported food aid.

For this framework to be effective during heightened periods of conflict, the agreement would need clearly defined agricultural zones, designated access routes, and procedures for notifying all relevant authorities of farming activities. Palestinian farmers could be included in a registry containing their farmland locations and information, and before each planting and harvesting period, international monitors could then coordinate with local agricultural cooperatives to identify which areas remain accessible and safe. Approved access routes and time slots could then be communicated to farmers and their relevant authorities, allowing for quick adjustments when security conditions inevitably change. International organisations such as the FAO and WFP could monitor implementation and document violations that affect food production. These international monitors would verify that the farmers are able to reach their fields safely, and this procedure would create a predictable system that could continue even as instability and conflict continues.

A clear monitoring structure is an essential component of this approach. An agreement is ineffective without an independent mechanism for determining whether its protections are being followed, which is why the inclusion of neutral humanitarian monitoring system is critical. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) could coordinate the monitoring process and consolidate reports, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) could keep track of land access, crop production, and agricultural infrastructure, and the World Food Programme (WFP) could oversee food availability, market prices, and food security at the household level.

The framework would therefore depend on cooperation among several groups rather than a single government with International organisations such as the OCHA, WFP, and FAO overseeing monitoring and coordination, Palestinian agricultural cooperatives would represent farmers and communicate local conditions, local authorities would help coordinate access, and the relevant Israeli and Palestinian

authorities would be responsible for agreeing on routes and access periods. This division of responsibility would make the system less dependent on one institution.

These organisations could employ field-monitoring teams to ensure that designated routes remain accessible and whether farmers are being prevented from reaching registered land. Monitoring reports could be compiled regularly and made available to the parties involved in the agreement. Importantly, monitoring should not depend solely on reports submitted by the parties being monitored, as this would undermine the independence of the framework.

The framework could monitor five main categories:

1. Agricultural access: the number and location of farmers able to reach their land, if designated routes remain open, the number and duration of access disruptions, and whether farmers can reach their lands during peak planting and harvesting seasons.

2. Infrastructure: the condition and, importantly, functionality of roads, irrigation and electricity systems, greenhouses, and storage facilities.

3. Agricultural production: the number of crops planted and harvested, yields, areas of damaged or inaccessible farmland, and production losses.

4. Food-system conditions: the ability to transport agricultural products to markets, local food availability, and market prices (including the effects of transportation restrictions on food costs), food environment profile, etc.

5. Household food security: household food consumption, access to sufficient, nutritious food, and dependence on emergency food systems, prevalence of malnutrition within households

The agreement may face political obstacles— Israel may be reluctant to guarantee agricultural access in areas it considers necessary to restrict, while Palestinian authorities and communities may be unwilling to accept arrangements they perceive as legitimising continued, unreasonable restrictions on agricultural land. Different authorities also have competing political interests and varying levels of control over territory. For this reason, the framework would need to separate agricultural access from broader political negotiations. Implementation of the Agricultural Access Agreement should focus specifically on protecting food production and security and civilian agricultural activity rather than requiring agreement on the larger, much more complex political conflict. If violations occur, monitors could document and verify the incident before referring it to an agreed international review panel. Repeated or deliberate violations could then trigger formal investigations and diplomatic action. The purpose would not be to create another military enforcement, but to establish consequences for violations. Without a system for documenting and responding to these violations, guaranteed access would remain dependent on voluntary compliance, giving farmers no reason to trust a system that could disappear precisely when they need it most.

More importantly, access to agricultural land is insufficient without rebuilding the infrastructure necessary to sustain food production.

Current emergency food systems in Gaza are vulnerable because of their heavy dependence on border access and unstable supply chains. Long-term food security policy must prioritise decentralised and sustainable agricultural systems capable of functioning independently during these periods of disruption and crisis.

This framework would also make it possible to identify which agricultural solutions are most needed in specific areas. For example, if a monitoring report reflects that farmers do have access to land but lack functioning irrigation systems, funding could be directed towards water-efficient irrigation. In this way, the solutions below would not operate separately from the mentoring framework, they would instead respond to the weaknesses identified through it.

One approach would be the expansion of greenhouse agriculture powered by decentralised renewable energy systems. Traditional open-field farming is difficult throughout Gaza because of land degradation, infrastructure constructionn, and the water scarcity issue. Greenhouse systems are a more sustainable alternative because they maximise output while using less land and water. Their effectiveness could then be observed via indicators such as the number of functioning greenhouses, crop yields, and water use.

Drip irrigation technology should additionally be utilised to reconstruct the agricultural environment in Palestine. Water scarcity is still one of the region's greatest agricultural limitations, and typical irrigation systems waste water through runoff and evaporation. Drip irrigation systems deliver water directly to plant roots, reducing water use significantly while simultaneously improving crop yields in arid climates. Solar-powered irrigation systems would also further reduce dependence on Gaza's unstable electrical infrastructure.

Renewable agricultural technology should be viewed as a governance strategy. Decentralised sustainable systems take away the reliance on centralised electrical grids vulnerable to blockade restrictions and damage, especially during times of war. In politically unstable environments such as Gaza and the West Bank, localised infrastructure is more resilient than centralised systems vulnerable to disruption.

Urban agriculture should also become a component of food security policy, particularly within Gaza where severe population density limits farmland availability. Things such as rooftop gardens, hydroponic systems, and vertical farming units could allow households to grow their own vegetables and crops despite limited land. Hydroponic systems are especially suitable for Gaza because they produce crops using nutrient-rich water rather than soil, allowing food production even in urban environments.

Nevertheless, the limitations of these recommendations must also be directly acknowledged. Reconstruction programs within agriculture cannot fully succeed if bombardment, displacement, and severe destruction and movement restrictions continue. Greenhouses, irrigation systems, and food cooperatives are still vulnerable during military escalations. Sustainable food security, furthermore, is dependent not only on agricultural reform but also long-term political stabilisation, adherence to international law, and protection of civilians, which is not presently a reality for Gaza.

Despite these limitations, sustainable agriculture is one of the most realistic pathways toward reducing long-term reliance on humanitarian aid. Current aid systems are economically unstable because they depend heavily on border access, which is not always granted, political coordination, and donor funding.

Urban agriculture cannot independently solve food insecurity entirely, but it can substantially improve nutrition between households and ensure that families become less vulnerable to transportation disruptions, price inflation, and supply shortages. Because Palestine is an area in which borders, imports, and transportation routes are so frequently disrupted, localised food production is a major solution.

Current emergency food programs will always remain necessary during active conflict, but their reliance on border access and donor funding makes them economically unstable and politically fragile in the long term. Food security in Gaza and the West Bank therefore requires more than emergency assistance: it requires policies that rebuild self-sufficiency at the household and community level whilst reducing dependence on imported food. A protected Agricultural Access Agreement could provide a framework for identifying and then *addressing* weaknesses across these systems, from agricultural access and infrastructure to food production and household food security. While such measures cannot eliminate the effects of conflict, they could reinforce the resilience of Palestinian food systems and minimise dependence on emergency aid.

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