



## GAZA'S HUMANITARIANISM PROBLEM

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*This essay explores the possible negative consequences of identifying the current situation in Gaza primarily as a humanitarian problem. Scholarship on the complicated effects of humanitarian action in general, the early history of humanitarian intervention in the lives of Palestinians, and the current politics of aid in Gaza all underscore these problems. The essay reflects on several aspects of what can be called the "humanitarianism problem" in Gaza by considering both how humanitarianism is sometimes deployed as a strategy for frustrating Palestinian aspirations and the often unintended political effects of the most well-intentioned humanitarian interventions.*

WRITING ABOUT THE ISRAELI military attacks on Gaza in January 2009, Avi Shlaim noted that the "undeclared aim [of the war] is to ensure that the Palestinians in Gaza are seen by the world simply as a humanitarian problem and thus to derail their struggle for independence and statehood."<sup>1</sup> How is it that humanitarianism could play a role in obstructing Palestinian statehood? Why might identifying the situation in Gaza as a "humanitarian problem" prove to have deleterious political effects? At first blush, this claim might seem surprising, even unlikely. After all, humanitarianism is widely understood as doing good, representing the capacity of human beings to care about and to respond to "distant suffering."<sup>2</sup> As the growing literature on humanitarianism makes clear, however, the effects of such interventions and identifications are far more complicated than a call to concern might suggest.

There is no doubt that there are urgent and still unmet needs in Gaza. According to the weekly situation reports issued by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the aftermath of the Israeli offensive, the most urgent needs included the opening of the crossings into the Strip to permit access for humanitarian personnel and supplies; the provision of goods such as "spare parts and fuel for the power plant, hospitals and water and sewage treatment facilities; cement, sand and other construction materials to rebuild destroyed schools, hospitals, clinics and homes"; and an infusion of cash, which is "urgently needed to reactivate the private sector and prevent increasing dependence on aid."<sup>3</sup> Gaza's current humanitarian demands are clearly enormous, but even before the Israeli incursion, Gazans were suffering from what a group

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of international aid agencies called a “humanitarian implosion.”<sup>4</sup> Since Hamas’s victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections in January 2006, Israel and the international community have maintained a blockade of the Gaza Strip that only tightened after Hamas’s takeover of Gaza in June 2007.<sup>5</sup>

Estimates of the costs of rebuilding Gaza hover around \$2 billion.<sup>6</sup> On 29 January, the United Nations launched a \$613-million appeal for crisis response, anticipating another appeal for longer-term needs to be launched later.<sup>7</sup> Even as he was reluctant to comment much on Operation Cast Lead itself, President Barack Obama responded to this appeal by authorizing the quick release of \$20 million to assist Palestinians suffering the effects of the war.<sup>8</sup> Talk of rebuilding began almost as soon as Israeli forces pulled back from Gaza; so did political struggles for the control of aid money.<sup>9</sup> Most foreign donors, including Arab states, wanted funds for Gaza to bypass Hamas and to be channeled through Fatah and the Ramallah branch of the Palestinian Authority instead.<sup>10</sup> As Hamas is the effective government in Gaza, it is unclear how this will be accomplished.

The current politics of aid in Gaza underscores some of the potential dangers inherent in humanitarianism. In exploring the effects of characterizing the situation as a humanitarian problem, this essay is not intended as a critique of humanitarian agencies working on the ground, whose personnel strive tirelessly in the face of great danger and hardship to fulfill their missions.<sup>11</sup> Its purpose, rather, is to raise questions about how we define the best strategies for acting in response to the situation. As such, this essay intends to be suggestive rather than comprehensive in its accounting of Gaza’s humanitarian landscape. To this end, it reflects on several aspects of what can be called the “humanitarianism problem” in Gaza by considering both how humanitarianism is sometimes deployed as a strategy for frustrating Palestinian aspirations and the often unintended political effects of the most well-intentioned humanitarian interventions.

I draw on the rich scholarship on the international humanitarian order to situate the Palestinian case within the broader landscape of humanitarian action. While the Palestinian case is often said to be exceptional, it is in fact intrinsically connected to this wider field. This case is distinguished by the long and extensive UN involvement in both the political fate of Palestine and the humanitarian condition of Palestinians. Indeed, humanitarianism, most often pursued under UN auspices, could be said to be one of the most consistent aspects of Palestinian life since the displacement and dispossession of most of the population in the 1948 war, known to Palestinians as the Nakba (catastrophe). This essay looks back to the first humanitarian efforts in Gaza after 1948 as a comparative example that confirms the complicated effects of such efforts. Evaluating the current humanitarian condition demands that we not only identify suffering and need—the first humanitarian impulse—but also carefully consider the impact of particular forms of evaluation and intervention.

## IDENTIFYING CAUSES AND VICTIMS

Evaluating humanitarian effects requires identifying humanitarian action. One challenge in this regard is that there exists neither a single definition of humanitarianism nor an agreed upon form of intervention or area of jurisdiction. Rather, humanitarianism is a field defined by debate: should it address the political causes of “disaster,” or limit itself to addressing its effects? Should it focus only on alleviating immediate suffering, or undertake development projects that might have more structural impact? Should humanitarian actors consider the use of force to support their missions, or must they reject an alliance with militarism as antithetical to their ethic? Each of these questions is very much alive. Broadly speaking, humanitarianism can describe a variety of interventions: from the delivery of food and medical care to the development of industry and education. It derives from several sources, compassionate concern and legal obligation chief among them. Humanitarian compassion is often based in religious traditions of charity, but it can also spring from secular claims to a common humanity. The evolving area of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) governing conduct in war and the treatment of occupied territories and peoples provides the normative basis for humanitarian obligations.<sup>12</sup>

Irrespective of the differences that exist among the people and agencies who define their work as humanitarian, all such action requires identifying the situations which demand intervention. Every year, Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors without Borders (MSF) publishes a list of what it calls the “top ten most underreported humanitarian crises.” The purpose of this list is to direct public attention to—and therefore encourage action on—tragedies that may not have received much media attention (an absence that is itself a political phenomenon).<sup>13</sup> Naming causes and identifying victims is crucial to what Didier Fassin calls humanitarianism’s “politics of life,”<sup>14</sup> underscoring a point that is often lost in the heated debates about whether humanitarianism *should* be political. Whatever its intent, and however carefully delimited its mandate, humanitarianism *always* has political effects.

Among what Fiona Terry calls the “paradoxes of humanitarian action” and David Kennedy describes as the “dark sides of virtue”<sup>15</sup> are the possibilities that humanitarian intervention may prolong conflicts that cause the suffering it seeks to alleviate; that principles of neutrality and confidentiality may impede calling perpetrators to account; that, in serving as gateways to assistance, procedures of refugee identification and registration may also impose restrictions on victims’ actions; and that the need to mobilize international compassion to support humanitarian endeavors may involve some degree of exploitation of people’s suffering.<sup>16</sup> Thinking about the effects of humanitarian naming and action on “causes” and “victims” respectively provides one way to explore this very complicated terrain.

The possibility that humanitarian intervention can impede resolving “the situation” is of great concern to humanitarian actors.<sup>17</sup> Few humanitarian agencies would consider it within their purview to work actively toward such a

resolution, and indeed most see their recusal from involvement in political processes as crucial to their ability to accomplish their goals. At the same time, they hope that carving out a “humanitarian space” within which they can protect lives and alleviate suffering will provide local actors with the political space in which to conclude conflicts and adjudicate responsibility. That warring parties may use the breathing room—or even the services—that humanitarianism provides to extend their campaigns is a source of great anguish for these agencies.<sup>18</sup>

Humanitarian action's impact on recipients of aid can be equally contradictory. By reducing people to their victim status—in part by requiring them to appear as exemplary victims and not political actors in order to receive recognition of their suffering, and in part as a byproduct of exigencies of aid delivery that restrict their capacities to act in other ways<sup>19</sup>—humanitarianism can contribute to the production of what Miriam Ticktin terms a “limited humanity.”<sup>20</sup> Humanitarian agencies depend heavily on donations from governments, foundations, and individuals, and on the mobilization of compassion. The global circulation of images of suffering becomes a necessity for “transforming emotion into donations.”<sup>21</sup> At the same time, there are ways in which humanitarian action, without meaning to, can serve as a space from which people can act politically and can provide a language to press such claims. Limit and possibility are linked in humanitarianism's effects on those it seeks to help.

### POST-NAKBA HUMANITARIANISM IN GAZA

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. As new levels of depredation are reached, the situation has regularly been described as the Strip's most profound humanitarian crisis since 1948.<sup>22</sup> Given that the Nakba serves as the ever-present comparison, it is helpful to look back at the humanitarian response to this earlier moment and its complicated effects on Palestinian life and community. This brief discussion draws on ethnographic and archival research conducted over the last ten years on these early humanitarian efforts, and seeks to understand the ways in which the aid regime that developed after 1948 shaped social relations, political community, and civic values in Gaza.<sup>23</sup> This research confirms that however narrowly humanitarian agencies may seek to define their missions, however carefully they adhere to humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, the effects of such aid are widespread and long-lasting. The assumption that aid agencies' nonpolitical approach will have no political impact is a fallacy.

The Nakba created serious political and humanitarian problems in Gaza and in other areas where Palestinians fled in the course of the war over the establishment of Israel. The international response to this situation addressed the latter. The UN, recognizing both the crisis and the responsibility of the international

community to do something about it, responded first by commissioning organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) to provide assistance to refugees, and later by establishing the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) to deliver this aid.<sup>24</sup> When UNRWA was created in 1950, its mission was to provide relief and other assistance to Palestinians who had lost their land and livelihoods, had been displaced from their homes, were in need of assistance, and resided in places close to historic Palestine (Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria) or in areas of Palestine that did not become part of Israel (the West Bank and Gaza).

Sixty years after this initial intervention, Gazans continue to reflect on the effects of humanitarian relief, often expressing very mixed feelings about

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receiving UN aid at all. Abu Salim, a refugee from Majdal (now the Israeli city of Ashqelon) whom I interviewed during my field research, recalled the advice he had received from an American relief worker at the time: “This food you eat from UNRWA—I want to tell you something, but do not say that I told you: if you reject the provisions and do not eat, then twenty people will die because of hunger, and then they will take you back soon to your original homes.” Abu Salim went on

to comment, “But we did not have that awareness. If we told people to do that, they would refuse.”<sup>25</sup> Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere identified relief as a right (a recognition of international responsibility for their plight) but at the same time worried that availing themselves of that right might hinder their realization of fundamental political rights, particularly their right to return to their homes. There is no easy answer to the political dilemmas produced by humanitarianism—not in 1948 and not now.

All Palestinian refugees shared the anguish and anxiety of the Nakba experience, and most ultimately came under UNRWA jurisdiction, but each space of refuge had its own particularities. The Gaza Strip, which came under Egyptian administration after 1948, was not part of any existing sovereign state. (Conversely, the West Bank was incorporated into Jordan from 1948–67.) Gaza’s provisional borders were defined by the 1949 armistice agreement between Israel and Egypt. Its entire population was Palestinian; the prewar population of about 80,000 increased by 300 percent with the influx of 250,000 refugees from cities and villages to the north and east of Gaza. All of these factors shaped initial relief projects in Gaza, most of which involved efforts to consolidate and negotiate the new categories of “refugee” and “native” as the dominant population and socioeconomic distinctions in Gaza. Those who qualified as refugees received UN aid; those who did not, including those who remained in their own houses but who had lost their lands and livelihoods, were not eligible for this assistance.

In circumstances where much of the native population had lost its land (which now lay on the other side of the border of what had become Israel), even

if they had not been displaced from their homes, the creation of operational distinctions among the post-Nakba population of the Gaza Strip—distinctions that were necessary to fit both the emerging postwar international humanitarian order and the specific UN mandate for aid to Palestinian refugees—clashed with the humanitarian impulse to assist *all* who were in need. Aid workers in Gaza were indeed often anguished by the constraints on their capacity to give aid.<sup>26</sup> Eventually native Gazans' acute need for help was met in other ways: the Egyptian government and organizations like CARE provided aid, and a small number of native Gazans made their way onto the ration rolls, either through fraudulent registrations or through the category of "Gaza poor."<sup>27</sup> As I have detailed elsewhere, the effects of these population distinctions extended far beyond matters of material assistance. One effect was to help establish the categories "refugee" and "native" as crucial social and political markers of difference within the community.<sup>28</sup> People in Gaza interacted and continue to interact through these categories and to make claims about national values and political positions in relation to them.

The early humanitarian experience in Gaza confirms that operational categories of aid—along with the mechanisms through which such aid is disbursed, such as refugee camps and rations—have social and political significance beyond the realm of the humanitarian order. As such, these categories form the materials out of which people identify themselves and their communities and through which they speak to each other and to the broader international community.<sup>29</sup> Humanitarianism does not wholly shut down politics; rather, it helps shape a political field of identity and action in ways that are not within the control of either relief workers or aid recipients.

Thinking about the effects on Gaza of the first relief projects can help clarify some of the stakes of the current humanitarian response. Both 1948 and 2009 are entirely man-made disasters: the first the result of war and Israel's refusal to allow refugees to return to their homes, and the second the result of both the recent Israeli military assault and the ongoing blockade of the territory as part of a strategy to depose the Hamas-led government. Humanitarianism is not an arena well-suited for pursuing accountability. Its cause is the redress of "suffering," not the crafting of political and military strategies to halt the actions and structures that produce this suffering. The humanitarian assistance provided to displaced and dispossessed Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere did not bring them any closer to their primary goal: to return to their homes. It did, however, have significant effects. Chief among these was the consolidation of the category of "refugee" as a means of humanitarian intervention and distinction, and the creation of the identity and experience of the refugee as a crucial element in Palestinian politics. Responses to Gaza's current crisis will undoubtedly give rise to new products of humanitarian intervention. What these products will be is not entirely predictable, but we need to think about the possibilities as we evaluate current efforts.

### HUMANITARIANISM AS OCCUPATION STRATEGY

There is considerable debate among Palestinians about the meaning and impact of both UN aid to refugees and the newer NGO-based development initiatives in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Some ascribe sinister motives to humanitarian interventions. As one Gazan commented to me, echoing beliefs I heard from others as well:

Western imperialism made us beggars in order to remain weak and stop fighting Israel. Was it really out of pity for the Palestinian people? No, there was an aim behind this. What was this aim? That the Palestinian forget his homeland since he takes the flour sack.<sup>30</sup>

As I have suggested, humanitarianism need not be cynically deployed to have negative effects, but given how frequently humanitarianism has been utilized as a tool in struggles against Palestinian political aspirations, this feature of the Palestinian experience with humanitarianism must be noted as well. Although I have drawn attention to Israeli uses of humanitarian language, it should be remembered—as the Gazan I quoted above suggested—that it is not only Israel that has been complicit in consolidating and deploying this discourse.<sup>31</sup>

Since its 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Israel has simultaneously claimed and disavowed a humanitarian relationship to the occupied Palestinian population by presenting itself as being motivated by humanitarian *compassion* even as it rejects the idea that it has any clearly defined humanitarian *obligations*. It is, in part, the indeterminacies in humanitarianism itself that enable such an apparently contradictory stance. As Lisa Hajjar notes, Israel rejected the claim that it had any legal responsibility to the Palestinian population under the Fourth Geneva Convention from the outset of the occupation, while also affirming that it would nonetheless “respect its ‘humanitarian provisions.’”<sup>32</sup> What it understood these provisions to be was left strategically undefined. Although this idiosyncratic stance was not accepted by the ICRC or by much of the international community, little has ever been done to compel Israel to comply with the provisions of international law. Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 was, in part, the latest twist in this long-running disavowal of an occupier’s responsibility.<sup>33</sup>

Israel’s framing of its policies in the occupied territories as “enlightened occupation”<sup>34</sup> (which was no longer tenable after the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987) was part and parcel of its deployment of the language of humanitarianism.<sup>35</sup> Not only was it hoped that by making economic and social conditions bearable Palestinian political demands might be defused; the language of humanitarianism provided cover for policies that directly worked against those demands. Policies such as moving people out of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip into new neighborhoods were pursued as part of a declared “‘humanitarian’ policy of urban renewal and health development”<sup>36</sup> but were

understood by Palestinians to be part of an attempt to dissolve refugee status. The first intifada (which began in Gaza) was seen, in part, as a refusal of the Palestinian population to acquiesce to the position that their problem was primarily of a humanitarian nature. Indeed, one of the great successes of the uprising was the increasingly widespread recognition that Palestinians had legitimate political claims, not just humanitarian needs. Unfortunately, the Oslo Accord and the Palestinian Authority it gave rise to proved to be weak vehicles for the achievement of these political goals.

Since the beginning of second intifada in 2000, humanitarian language has reassumed its central place in Israeli discourse about its relationship to Palestinians—paired, of course, with a language of belligerency and danger centered on “enemies,” “enemy territories,” “terrorists,” and so on. As part of its efforts to contain the intifada and then to punish the population for electing Hamas, Israel increased the intensity of its closure of Gaza. All the while, Israeli officials continue to insist that they are concerned with the welfare of the population. In 2006, then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, while denying that there was a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, averred that despite its sanctions against Gaza, “we wouldn’t allow one baby to suffer one night because of a lack of dialysis.”<sup>37</sup> Similar language was heard during and after Operation Cast Lead, with Defense Minister Ehud Barak stating in the midst of the attack that Israel was “mindful of the humanitarian situation in Gaza and will continue to do our best to facilitate humanitarian solutions on the ground in cooperation with international humanitarian bodies.”<sup>38</sup> Not only did Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni deny that the war caused a humanitarian crisis, she even seemed to suggest it had improved Gazans’ living conditions: “There is no humanitarian crisis in the Strip. . . . The crossings are open, more than it [*sic*] used to be before the military operation.”<sup>39</sup>

As international agencies have tried to step up assistance to Gaza in the aftermath of the war, they have run up against the limits of Israel’s definition of “humanitarian.” Food and medicine have gone in, but supplies to rebuild destroyed homes remain restricted.<sup>40</sup> As Israel’s minister of welfare and social affairs indicated about these limits: “We are studying it . . . the exact mechanism hasn’t been devised yet. . . . Israel helps fully on the humanitarian issue. Thereafter it’s a red line.”<sup>41</sup> Israel’s repeated insistence that it will meet humanitarian needs helps produce a circular logic. Anything that Israel allows into Gaza is, by virtue of that permission, humanitarian; anything that it bars—whether cement for rebuilding or spare parts for power plants—is *ipso facto* declared to have political significance.<sup>42</sup> It is in part the very power of the humanitarian claim that makes possible a political strategy of focusing international attention on concern rather than obligation, of identifying only the most basic goods as humanitarian necessities, and thereby restricting the political, economic, and social opportunities available to Palestinians in Gaza.<sup>43</sup> To see how this works,

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however, one has to turn not to the use of humanitarian language for political purposes but to the incidental political effects of the “heart of humanitarian activity.”<sup>44</sup>

### CRISIS AND THE “NEW NORMAL”

Humanitarian agencies use a variety of strategies to mobilize compassion—to generate both attention and donation—including highlighting “crisis” as a cause for immediate action. The language of crisis can be very effective for the mission of generating attention. There are other consequences of this language, however—one being that the attention it generates is often fleeting. With its focus on the newly catastrophic, crisis response can have the effect of narrowing the range of things that are considered necessary to address. Not that other, more systemic issues are described as unimportant, but they begin to appear as second-order matters. The repeated invocation of crisis, while certainly warranted, also has the effect of making the last bad situation the new benchmark for “normal.”<sup>45</sup>

The normalcy effect is evident both in news reports about conditions in Gaza (which, even as they describe the enormous destruction, often speak of a “return to normalcy”<sup>46</sup>) and in accounts by humanitarian agencies which use comparisons with conditions prior to the war to illuminate the levels of destruction. The powerful March 2008 “Humanitarian Implosion” report cited earlier, for instance, stated that at that time, 80 percent of the Gazan population was dependent on humanitarian aid, while in 2006 that number was 63 percent. As the purpose of the report was to highlight the crisis produced by Israeli restrictions imposed on Gaza after Hamas’ election victory, this frame of reference makes sense, but it has the troubling side effect of revising the definition of “normal” for Gazans. Aid agencies are aware of these possible effects, and some try to call attention to how bad things have been on either side of the latest crisis benchmark. For instance, in the midst of the war, American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA) produced (and later updated) a fact sheet entitled “Gaza Statistics Before and After the Bombardment” that made clear just how bad things were before.<sup>47</sup> Such efforts to highlight the absence of normalcy in Gaza before 27 December are important, but they fail to counteract the overall narrowing effect of crisis language.

If crisis has the effect of lowering the floor for “normal” conditions, another effect of crisis language is the loss of history. The “Humanitarian Implosion” report stated that: “In September 2000, some 24,000 Palestinians crossed out of Gaza every day to work in Israel. Today that number is zero.”<sup>48</sup> What the report did not say is that the 2000 figure was itself significantly lower than the number that worked inside Israel before the first intifada (70,000) or than the number before Israel’s first implementation of the closure policy in 1991 (45,000–50,000).<sup>49</sup> Departing from the “partial integration”<sup>50</sup> of Palestinians into the Israeli economy as laborers and consumers, which was the strategy for the first twenty years of occupation, the policy in recent years has been to

replace Palestinian labor with imported foreign workers and thereby to render the Palestinian population “surplus humanity”<sup>51</sup>—irrelevant to Israel except as either enemies or potential objects of humanitarian concern.

While this longer time frame and broader analysis is crucial for understanding economic conditions in Gaza, it does not fit easily into the clarion call of crisis. A nearly twenty-year process of labor displacement is exactly that: a political *process* rather than just a moment of crisis. This strategic transformation in labor conditions to meet political goals is beyond the scope of humanitarian reporting, but it is vital to understand. In the wake of Israel's 2005 “disengagement” from Gaza and its assertion that it no longer occupies the Strip, this process of rendering Gazans “distant”—people whose suffering could evoke compassion, but not obligation—has become official Israeli policy.

### EXEMPLARY VICTIMS

If crisis is the condition for humanitarian intervention, victims are its targets. Humanitarianism relies on the identification of vulnerability to determine who needs assistance and to compel people to donate to this assistance. In doing this kind of identification work, though, it also introduces new sorts of vulnerability, as the victim category is a relatively narrow one. People risk losing their identification as victims—and therefore their position as proper objects of compassion—if they do not appear “innocent” enough, or if they otherwise do not conform to the narrative demands of this category.<sup>52</sup> As with many features of humanitarian discourse, the power of the claim and its limiting effects are intrinsically linked.

Reporting on the aftermath of the Israeli offensive, MSF highlighted the evaluation by Gazan medical personnel in its employ that “every inhabitant of the Gaza Strip, without exception, has suffered in this war.”<sup>53</sup> This statement was echoed by other humanitarian organizations that called attention to the fact that the entire population of Gaza fits the victim category. Similar calls to universal victim status were made in the post-1948 period, when AFSC volunteers insisted that “it is becoming increasingly difficult to make a legitimate distinction on the basis of food need as between the refugees and the inhabitants of the area,”<sup>54</sup> and that “*all* Arabs with their homes in Palestine were destitute and proper subjects for public assistance.”<sup>55</sup> In 1948, efforts to expand relief eligibility were hindered by the institutional requirements of the emerging aid regime.

In the current situation, the assertion of universal victimhood may also fail, but on slightly different grounds. If the important thing in the post-1948 period was sorting people according to bureaucratic and legalistic taxonomies, current responses to suffering in Gaza have focused more on the question of being “proper” victims. Humanitarian compassion seems increasingly reserved for those who only suffer but do not act. In the eyes of many, Gazans disqualified themselves from the victim category when they elected Hamas in 2006 and then continued to respect the results of that election despite an

international blockade designed to compel a change of heart. The power of victim identification is also its peril.

### **HUMANITARIAN SPACE AND THE ISOLATION OF GAZA**

Different forms of intervention into human life require different approaches to space and place. For development projects in the post-World War II era, the key space has been the national entity (and by extension its national economy), even though such boundaries may not be the most relevant to understanding the conditions in which people live.<sup>56</sup> The language of human rights references a global space, the realm of the “international community” and institutions such as the International Criminal Court and the United Nations, that would—organizationally at least—remove people from the specificities of their locales for the purposes of protection.<sup>57</sup> Two sorts of space are key for humanitarianism: the space of crisis (as described above), which precedes and motivates the intervention; and the humanitarian space, which both is produced by humanitarian actors and makes their work possible. The idea of this humanitarian space—a space apart from conflict, a zone that permits the delivery of assistance—has been crucial to the work of these organizations. The experience during Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, when the three-hour daily halt to firing and the establishment of a humanitarian corridor were repeatedly violated, underscores how fragile this space can be.

Aid agencies insist on the importance of this humanitarian space for their effective operations and decry intrusions into this space. But they also understand that this space is limited. For many, part of the purpose of the carving out this humanitarian space is precisely to create greater opportunities for actors who occupy the “political space” to set about the work of imagining solutions to problems and structural transformations of conditions.<sup>58</sup> Even as humanitarian agencies understand the humanitarian space in operational (and limited) terms, its discursive effects are arguably much broader. In the public imaginary it may become a descriptive rather than an operational category. As such, it connotes not a space of action, but a place of living—a place populated by “humanitarian subjects” who (as described above) either live as “proper” victims or are unworthy of concern.

Thus, the idea of the humanitarian space can have the unwitting effecting of contributing to the separation and fragmentation of social and political spaces. Even so, the primary cause of Gaza’s isolation has been neither humanitarian description nor humanitarian action. Rather, isolation is the direct result of Israeli policies of closure and surveillance (starting most clearly under the Oslo Accord and more acutely during the second intifada, but with earlier roots as well) and has been further exacerbated 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. A crucial exception to this lack of movement is the capacity of the Israeli military to get

in to Gaza at any time and from any direction. Israeli closure policy renders Gaza a qualitatively different sort of humanitarian space: it has become a space where, aside from military actors, the only people who can be there are those who are part of a humanitarian operation, whether as victims or as aid workers. In this sense, it is not only Gaza as a space, but Gazans as a people, that can be further isolated by the humanitarian frame.

### WHAT NEXT FOR GAZA?

Repeated humanitarian crises entail repeated rebuilding. Whether as development aid during the Oslo years or as humanitarian assistance in response to repeated IDF assaults during the last eight years, huge amounts of money have been spent reconstructing the same buildings, homes, infrastructure, and roads in Gaza. As long as foreign donors continue to bear these costs, there is no financial penalty for repetitive destruction. In the aftermath of January's operation, talk has turned once again to the "reconstruction process." The question that dominates discussions between international donors, Israel, and the West Bank branch of the Palestinian Authority is how to rebuild Gaza without strengthening Hamas. As Israeli spokesperson Mark Regev put it: "We want to make sure that the rehabilitation of Gaza doesn't turn into the rehabilitation of Hamas."<sup>59</sup> His comments were closely echoed by Saeb Erekat, a Fatah negotiator: "No money will be sent to Gaza before an agreed upon government will be formed."<sup>60</sup> The United States shares this attitude. Responding to reports that the Obama administration plans to provide \$900 million for the rebuilding effort, an administration official told the *New York Times* that "none of the money will go to Hamas; it will be funneled through NGOs and UN groups."<sup>61</sup>

Responding to these discussions, commentator Nicola Nasser has described the rebuilding process as "the latest siege weapon."<sup>62</sup> Challenging all the parties involved, Nasser argues that: "the urgent humanitarian mission has been politicized, whereas it should remain above the political fray between Palestinians, Arab, foreign powers, and everyone else whose voices are loud enough to drown out the appeals of those in need. There is nothing to debate about humanitarian aid." While Nasser is exactly right about the terms of humanitarianism—it is meant to be nonpolitical and nonnegotiable—his argument also confirms the limits of this demand. Even as aid organizations are careful to remain neutral and nonpolitical, their ability to motivate humanitarian attention and resources is always embedded in broader political, legal, and moral conditions. Not everybody in a crisis situation will receive compassion or be deemed a "proper" victim. Ignoring the inevitable politics of humanitarian aid and recognition will not make it go away.

It is vital to understand both that there have been self-conscious and ongoing efforts to "ensure that the Palestinians in Gaza are seen by the world simply as a humanitarian problem,"<sup>63</sup> and that the most noble humanitarian efforts can unwittingly impede political resolution. As long as Palestinians are dependent on the compassion of others, they are also vulnerable to the perils

of being denied that compassion. The humanitarian position is a precarious one. As soon as people express a more robust sense of themselves as social and political actors, they run the risk of losing their categorization as “exemplary” and “proper” victims and thus of falling outside the frame through which humanitarianism can understand and assist them.

So what is the answer for Gaza? This essay does not argue that the work of humanitarian agencies should stop, or that concerned people should stop demanding the delivery of aid. Such assistance is clearly vital. What I am suggesting is that Palestinians and those who are concerned about their fate should seek other frames, legal and political as well as moral, through which to analyze the situation and intervene in the ongoing cycle of destruction followed by delivery of aid. Gaza’s humanitarian crisis must be seen as a symptom of a political situation—a result of occupation—and any discussion of humanitarian aid should be accompanied by such analysis.

Efforts by the recipients of aid to change the meaning and effects of relief should be supported as well. The Palestinians’ earliest experiences with humanitarianism demonstrate that refugees (and not only political leaders) have refused to accept intervention only on its own terms. Palestinians have sought in various ways to make this central facet of their experience part of their political lives. The lessons of this history should not be lost now, as humanitarian needs have once again spiked to emergency levels. Recognition that Palestinians have legitimate political demands and not just humanitarian needs should not be lost in the face of yet another emergency. What is the best mechanism for pressing those demands needs to be carefully debated among Palestinians. Not all forms of politics are equally effective, or indeed equally valid, but the right not just to (bare) life, but to political life, should be imperative.

## NOTES

1. Avi Shlaim, “How Israel Brought Gaza to the Brink of Humanitarian Catastrophe,” *Guardian*, 7 January 2009. While for Israeli officials the transformation of the situation from a political to a humanitarian one may be an “undeclared aim,” there are actors who make this aim explicit. An organization called Jerusalem Summit, with a “presidium” that includes Daniel Pipes and U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback, has proposed what it calls “A New Paradigm for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: From the Political to the Humanitarian” (see [www.jerusalemsummit.org/eng/brochure\\_hs\\_short\\_eng.pdf](http://www.jerusalemsummit.org/eng/brochure_hs_short_eng.pdf)). This proposal includes delegitimizing the idea of a Palestinian state (and indeed the underlying national

narrative), promoting the transfer out of the West Bank and Gaza of the Palestinian population, and the closure of UNRWA. While many of these proposals are at the extreme right on the spectrum, some of the claims made about Palestinian refugee status are echoed by more apparently mainstream voices.

2. See Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

3. “Field Update on Gaza from the Humanitarian Coordinator: 30 January–2 February 2009, 1700 Hours,” available at [www.ochaopt.org](http://www.ochaopt.org). Earlier reports list the same priority needs. The most recent situation report from the UN OCHA was issued on 30 March 2009.

4. "The Gaza Strip: A Humanitarian Implosion," report issued jointly by Amnesty International, CARE, Oxfam, Save the Children, Christian Aid, Médecins du Monde, CAFOD, and Trócaire, March 2008.

5. "Carter Calls Gaza Blockade a Crime and Atrocity," Reuters, 18 April 2008.

6. "Egypt to Host \$2bn Gaza Reconstruction Meet on March 2," Reuters, 30 January 2009.

7. "UN Appeals for \$613 Million to Help Gaza Recover after Israeli Offensive," UN News Service, 19 January 2009.

8. John Nichols, "Obama Released Aid for Gaza," *Nation's State of Change* blog, 31 January 2009, available at [www.thenation.com/blogs/state\\_of\\_change/](http://www.thenation.com/blogs/state_of_change/) (accessed 2 February 2009).

9. Joshua Mitnick, "Newest Gaza Fight: Who Controls Reconstruction Aid?" *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 January 2009.

10. In a brief civil conflict in June 2007, Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip. Since then, Palestinian governing authority has been split between Fatah and Hamas, and between the West Bank and Gaza.

11. Many aid workers in Gaza would also agree with my assessment of some of the dangers that come along with this labeling.

12. These obligations are most clearly codified in the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949.

13. According to the Web site, "the list seeks to generate greater awareness of the magnitude and severity of crises that may or may not be reflected in media accounts." See [doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/topten/](http://doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/topten/). This year, the term "underreported" was dropped from the list, perhaps to give MSF the opportunity to highlight reported but still underserved crises.

14. Didier Fassin, "Humanitarianism as a Politics of Life," *Public Culture* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2007), pp. 499-520.

15. See Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Press, 2002), and David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

16. See Mariella Pandolfi, "Contract of Mutual (In)Difference: Governance and the

Humanitarian Apparatus in Contemporary Albania and Kosovo," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2003), pp. 369-81; Liisa Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (August 1996), pp. 377-404; and Peter Redfield, "Doctors, Borders, and Life in Crisis," *Cultural Anthropology* 20, no. 3 (August 2005), pp. 328-61.

17. See Paul Rabinow, "Midst Anthropology's Problems," *Cultural Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (May 2002), pp. 135-49.

18. The example of Interahamwe militia, involved in the Rwandan genocide, using refugee camps in Zaire as organizational bases is a dramatic and oft-discussed instance of this problem (see Terry, *Condemned to Repeat*).

19. See Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), and Elena Fiddian, "Relocating: The Asylum Experience in Cairo," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 8, no. 2 (July 2006), pp. 295-318.

20. Miriam Ticktin, "Where Ethics and Politics Meet: The Violence of Humanitarianism in France" *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 1 (February 2006), pp. 33-49.

21. Rony Brauman, "Global Media and the Myths of Humanitarian Relief: The Case of the 2004 Tsunami," in Richard Wilson and Richard Brown, eds., *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 114.

22. The same point is often made about the current state of Palestinian politics: it appears to be in the greatest disarray since the Nakba.

23. For more extensive and comprehensive analyses of these efforts, see: Ilana Feldman, "The Quaker Way: Ethical Labor and Humanitarian Relief," *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 4 (November 2007), pp. 689-705; "Difficult Distinctions: Refugee Law, Humanitarian Practice, and Political Identification in Gaza," *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no. 1 (February 2007), pp. 129-69; "Mercy Trains and Ration Rolls: Between Government and Humanitarianism in

Gaza," in Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Nefissa Naguib, eds., *Interpreting Welfare and Relief in the Middle East* (Leiden: Brill Press, 2008), pp. 175–94.

24. In addition to this humanitarian response, the United Nations also tried to work toward a political resolution to the situation, both through General Assembly resolutions such as resolution 194 and the establishment of UN bodies dedicated to working toward this end, such as the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine.

25. Author interview, Gaza City, 13 March 1999.

26. American Friends Service Committee Archives [AFSC], #80, Minutes of Camp Leaders Meeting, 6 October 1949.

27. UNRWA Archives, Box RE 7, File RE 210/01, Eligibility Registration, CRS of Frontier Villages, Jerusalem Poor and Gaza Poor.

28. See Feldman, "Difficult Distinctions."

29. See Ilana Feldman, "Refusing Invisibility: Documentation and Memorialization in Palestinian Refugee Claims," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 4 (December 2008), pp. 498–516.

30. Author interview, Gaza City, 11 March 1999.

31. Indeed, there is a sense in which the entire international response to the Palestine problem since 1948 could be seen as an effort to define the situation in humanitarian rather than political terms, which is itself a political strategy.

32. Lisa Hajjar, *Courting Conflict: The Israeli Court System in the West Bank and Gaza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 54. As Hajjar also notes, the ICRC considers the entirety of the Geneva Conventions to be humanitarian.

33. Humanitarian and human rights organizations widely disagree with this Israeli claim: "The contention by Israeli officials that Israel is no longer bound by the laws of occupation since it redeployed its forces to the perimeter of the Gaza Strip in 2005 is a fallacy. Israel retains effective control of the Gaza Strip, by virtue of the full control it exercises over the Gaza Strip's land border, its air space and territorial waters, and the movement of people and goods. Hence, the Israeli authorities are bound by their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law to ensure the welfare of

the Palestinian population in the OPT" ("Humanitarian Implosion," p. 6).

34. See Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, The War, and the Year That Transformed the Middle East* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

35. Benjamin Netanyahu's plan for economic peace without political accommodation, an idea he began pushing in November 2008, seems like a return to this earlier approach to occupation.

36. Abdul-Ilah Abu Ayyash "Israeli Regional Planning Policy in the Occupied Territories" *Journal of Palestine Studies* 5, no. 3–4 (Spring–Summer 1976), p. 100.

37. "Olmert Denies Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza," *USA Today*, 19 May 2006.

38. "Rebuilding Will Be 'Very Complicated,'" *Gazette* (Montreal), 18 January 2009.

39. "Livni: Cease-fire in Gaza Would Grant Hamas Legitimacy," *Ha'Aretz*, 1 January 2009.

40. As it turned out, not even all food was deemed humanitarian. When Sen. John Kerry visited Gaza in February 2009, he learned that Israel was prohibiting the entry of pasta into the Strip. As reported in *Ha'Aretz*, "He was told by United Nations aid officials that 'Israel does not define pasta as part of humanitarian aid—only rice shipments,'" (25 February 2009). With Kerry's intercession, Israel changed its policy.

41. "In Gaza, the Wait to Rebuild Lingers," *New York Times*, 25 January 2009.

42. A recent report in the *New York Times* that the Palestinian Authority has stopped paying for the treatment of Palestinians in Israeli hospitals underscores the limits of Israel's humanitarianism vis-à-vis Palestinians. The article notes that "Israel has long pointed to its medical care of Palestinians as an example of its advanced skills and humanitarianism" ("Palestinians Pull Patients from Israeli Hospitals," *New York Times*, 9 February 2009). While an outsider hearing that Israel provides medical care to some Palestinians as a humanitarian gesture might think this meant that it paid for this care, the meaning of humanitarianism in this context is that Palestinians are granted permission to be paying customers in Israeli hospitals.

43. Israel is not the only party that has engaged in humanitarian discourse. Both Fatah and Hamas have used this language

in making their claims against each other and against Israel.

44. Fassin, "Politics of Life," p. 502.

45. Other discourses and styles of intervention also use the language of crisis, sometimes to demand structural transformation. I think, for instance, of current discussions about whether there is possibility embedded in the current economic crisis to rework financial institutions, the role of government in American society and markets, and the public infrastructure. The actions proposed by humanitarianism generally focus on survival, not transformation.

46. News coverage of Gaza after the 18 January halt to the war describes the return to "normalcy" ("Gaza Ebbs toward Normalcy," *New York Times* online, available at [www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/01/26/world/20080126GAZA\\_index.html](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2009/01/26/world/20080126GAZA_index.html)) and the

"return to life in Gaza" ("Amid the Destruction, A Return to Life in Gaza," *New York Times*, 24 January 2009).

47. Available at [www.anera.org/aboutUs/documents](http://www.anera.org/aboutUs/documents). Among the statistics highlighted are the fact that prior to 27 December, 70 percent of Gazan families lived on less than \$3 a day and that 23 of 3,900 industrial enterprises remained operational. On the post-conflict side of the ledger ANERA notes, among other things, that "Access to electricity has returned to its pre-27 December status: much of the Gaza Strip receives only intermittent electricity."

48. "The Gaza Strip: A Humanitarian Implosion," p. 5.

49. Sara Roy, "Gaza: New Dynamics of Civic Disintegration," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 22, no. 4 (Summer 1993), pp. 20-31.

50. Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 84.

51. See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006).

52. Didier Fassin and Estelle D'Halluin, "The Truth from the Body: Medical Certificates as Ultimate Evidence for Asylum Seekers," *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 4 (December 2005), pp. 597-608.

53. "Every Single Inhabitant of Gaza, Without Exception, Has Suffered in This War," MSF article, 13 February 2009, available at [www.msf.org](http://www.msf.org).

54. AFSC, #40 FS Sect Palestine, memo from Howard Wriggins, 18 March 1949.

55. AFSC, #75 FS Sect Palestine, memo from Howard Wriggins to Colin Bell, 15 May 1949.

56. See James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

57. This global space has clearly never been realized in the manner that many human rights activists might hope. State sovereignty and the play of interests ensure that there is no space wholly apart from people's locations to provide protection.

58. Michel Agier and Françoise Bouchet-Sangier, "Humanitarian Spaces: Spaces of Exception," in Fabrice Weissman, ed., *In the Shadow of "Just Wars": Violence, Politics, and Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca: Cornell Press, 2004), pp. 297-313. Political talk is certainly taking place about Gaza and Palestine more generally, though it is difficult to feel optimistic about its significance.

59. Mitnick, "Newest Gaza Fight: Who Controls Reconstruction Aid?"

60. Mitnick, "Newest Gaza Fight: Who Controls Reconstruction Aid?"

61. "U.S. to Give \$900 Million in Gaza Aid, Officials Say," *New York Times*, 24 February 2009.

62. Nicola Nasser, "Gaza New Siege Mechanism," *al-Abram Weekly*, 4 February 2009.

63. Shlaim, "How Israel Brought Gaza to the Brink of Humanitarian Catastrophe."