

As Hunger Spreads in Gaza, Gangs Looting Aid Become Increasingly Brazen

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Police officers are afraid to protect convoys because wearing a uniform and bearing arms makes them a target for Israeli soldiers

Palestinians carry bags of flour they grabbed from an aid truck near an Israeli checkpoint in Gaza City this week. Credit: Kosay Al Nemer/Reuters

Looting by Palestinians in Gaza of aid trucks, food warehouses and the contents of internally displaced people's homes has increased amid the spread of hunger, Gazans and international aid officials have reported. There have also been cases of attacks on aid truck drivers.

Both individuals and organized gangs are participating in the looting. The gangs exploit the fact that Hamas police officers are unable to go out armed and in uniform to protect the aid trucks and the empty and half-destroyed homes in areas the IDF has withdrawn from, for fear of being targeted by the army. Reuters reported last week that Ambassador David Satterfield, the U.S. special envoy for Middle East humanitarian issues, said that Israeli forces had killed Palestinian police protecting a UN aid convoy in Rafah.

Palestinian children wait to receive food cooked by a charity kitchen in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip this week. Credit: Mohammed Salem/Reuters

As a result, he said at a meeting of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the police have refused to protect the convoys. Satterfield said the police escorts include Hamas members but also officers with no direct affiliation to the militant group. Without arms and uniforms, the police lack deterrence.

UN and humanitarian organizations involved in bringing aid into the Gaza Strip have discussed possible solutions to protect trucks and their drivers. One of the proposals is to deploy police officers in the neighborhoods in which they were stationed in the past - possibly unarmed and in plain clothes - to deter gangs. The use of private security companies has also been discussed, but their personnel too would not be able to carry weapons, as they would risk being killed by Israeli forces.

The issue of security for humanitarian aid supplies has been raised in talks with Israeli representatives. Israel must prove that it is complying with the instructions of [the International Court of Justice and allowing humanitarian aid to enter Gaza](#). A Western diplomat told Haaretz, "Looting breaks the food distribution chain after it has been brought with great effort to the Gaza border." The diplomat added that the food brought to the border was in any event far from sufficient.

The diplomat said there is no way of telling what part of the looted food and items stolen from homes

is used by private individuals and how much of it ends up on the black market, “which, as anywhere else in the world, develops in situations of scarcity.” His position – like that of aid organizations and UN organizations – is that increasing the volume of aid is insufficient to curb looting and black-market activities, which only exacerbate hunger and despair. It is imperative, the diplomat said, to bring the private sector back into the picture and allow it to bring in goods for sale, provided that prices are fixed and can be controlled. Before the war, 91 percent of goods in Gaza went through the private sector.

Palestinians sell canned food at a main street in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip last week. Credit: Mohammed Abed/AFP

One aid worker told Haaretz that it was hard to describe an act necessary for survival as “theft.”

“There is a difference between going into an empty house and taking basic items such as blankets or food for personal use, and organized looting in order to sell on the black market,” she said. She noted that there was certainly a difference between such acts and [looting committed by Israeli soldiers](#). In aid worker slang, looting of aid trucks by private individuals is known as “spontaneous aid distribution.”

A Gaza resident who moved to Rafah told Haaretz that friends told him that his apartment had been looted several times. He said he imagines that it’s Palestinians – not soldiers – who took things such as a gas canister – something he was most upset about – and foodstuffs. Like the aid worker, he could understand private individuals who were left in northern Gaza, where aid rarely arrives, committing such acts.

Survival mechanisms

Four factors are preventing basic food items from coming into northern Gaza, where hundreds of thousands of people have remained and with thousands more returning. One, Israel has prevented aid trucks from reaching the area. Two, there was insufficient fuel for Gazan trucks to carry the aid to the north. Three, the few trucks that did make it through were looted on the way.

Finally, drivers are afraid to make the journey without protection for themselves and their cargo. The aid worker told Haaretz that several of her colleagues were trapped in northern Gaza. “Today, they are crying and tell us they have no food and no water, but we can’t help them,” the aid worker said. “So why do we even exist?”

Not only people in the north are hungry, the aid worker stressed. “In conditions of hunger, people do what they can to survive, be they individuals, in clans or in any other organized group on a common basis,” she said. “That is completely expected.” Like the diplomat who spoke with Haaretz, she said this phenomenon is prevalent in similar situations worldwide.

A Palestinian sews diapers in a workshop in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip this week. Credit: Ibraheem Abu Mustafa/Reuters

But she said the phenomenon of gangs looting in Gaza emerged relatively late compared to other places she has worked, where the social fabric unraveled due to major disasters. “In other places, it happened in 48 hours,” she noted. “Here, it took four months.”

The scope of humanitarian aid is measured by the number of trucks whose cargo entered Gaza, compared to pre-war numbers - 500 per day, including fuel supplies. The cargo of each truck must pass a security check and be transferred, back to back, from an Egyptian or Israeli truck to a Gazan truck.

This comparison, however, is deceptive; before the war, Gaza produced much of its own food - meat and poultry, eggs, dairy products, vegetables and fruits. Farmland, greenhouses, livestock and chicken coops were completely destroyed and animals were killed in bombings or slaughtered before starving or dying of thirst.

Dependence on food from outside Gaza is now almost absolute.

Moreover, the destruction of the water infrastructure including purification and desalination plants means trucks have to transport water in quantities that were unnecessary before the war. Even so, Gazans don't get the minimum required amount of 20 liters per person per day.

A Palestinian girl carries containers filled with water in Rafah on the southern Gaza Strip last week. Credit: Mohammed Abed/AFP

The largest number of trucks whose cargo entered Gaza in a single day this year was on January 10; 236, according to the United Nations. Since then, only on four days has the number of trucks unloading their cargo at Gaza's crossings exceeded 200. In other words, even on the busiest days, the quantities of food and basic commodities - such as blankets, diapers and charcoal (which made up a significant part of the cargo entering Gaza on February 18, for example) is far from meeting basic needs.

"So, when trucks enter Rafah," says the aid worker, "desperate people, walking in the streets like zombies suddenly come from all directions - dozens, hundreds and then thousands - and crowd around the food and water trucks," trying to take everything they can. A Gazan who moved to Rafah told Haaretz, "The concern is that the more hunger, despair and frustration with aid organizations grow, the more daring the organized gangs become, and the more they sell their loot on the black market at insane prices."

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P.S.

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