



The food weapon: a never-ending and horrendous story...

Gaza

As some political leaders around the world finally start to feel concerned about the over 2 million people living in terror in Gaza, under an Israeli government that is carried away by an anti-democratic drift, led by a figure whose cynicism is matched only by his selfishness and his political dependence on a few fanatical, ultra-religious, and racist ministers, it seems more important than ever to revisit the food weapon and its long and horrendous history.

Indeed, in addition to enduring bombings that have claimed tens of thousands of victims – mostly women and children gathered in refugee camps – **the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip is artificially starved**, in disregard of international law (see **box**).

Gaza - Horror and shame

On 2 March 2025, Israel decided to ban the entry of humanitarian convoys into Gaza under siege.

Given this ban, the available food stocks on site and the very limited local production possibilities*, FAO estimates the average calorie intake available in Gaza at 1,470 kilocalories per person per day. The UN agency also points out that a significant portion of the Palestinian population will not be able to obtain even this inadequate amount. This is particularly true for the most vulnerable groups such as children, pregnant and breastfeeding women, the elderly, and chronically ill individuals.

It is worth recalling here that to meet nutritional needs, a minimum calorie intake of 2,100 kilocalories per person per day is necessary, according to the FAO. This would require 120 aid trucks to enter Gaza daily.

For FAO, the ban imposed by the Israeli government constitutes 'a systematic denial of the right to adequate food for the population in the Gaza Strip' [\[read pp. 8-9\]](#). It violates articles 23 and 59 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 concerning the protection of civilian persons in time of war which 'require occupying powers to allow free passage of essential humanitarian supplies, including food, when the population is inadequately supplied' [\[read\]](#). The Protocol Additional of 1977 to the Geneva Conventions adds that 'starvation of civilians as a method of warfare' is prohibited by Article 54(1) as well as attacks or obstructions targeting 'objects indispensable to their survival', including food reserves, agricultural areas, and water systems - Article 54(2) [\[read p. 9\]](#).

In a recent press release, FAO talks about an imminent famine, and food aid is only trickling in [\[read\]](#). This situation is a shame for a state that claims to be democratic

* It is estimated that over 75% of agricultural land has been destroyed by the war. [\[read\]](#).

Worse even, it appears, from a number of statements by Israeli ministers [read [here](#) and [here](#)], that the pursued objective is to put the Palestinian population in such a horrible situation that they will attempt to leave Gaza. Therefore, it is a state policy of ethnic cleansing aimed at emptying the territory of its Palestinian population to make way for Israeli settlers.

Unfortunately, the use of food as a weapon by Israel is not an exception, quite the opposite.

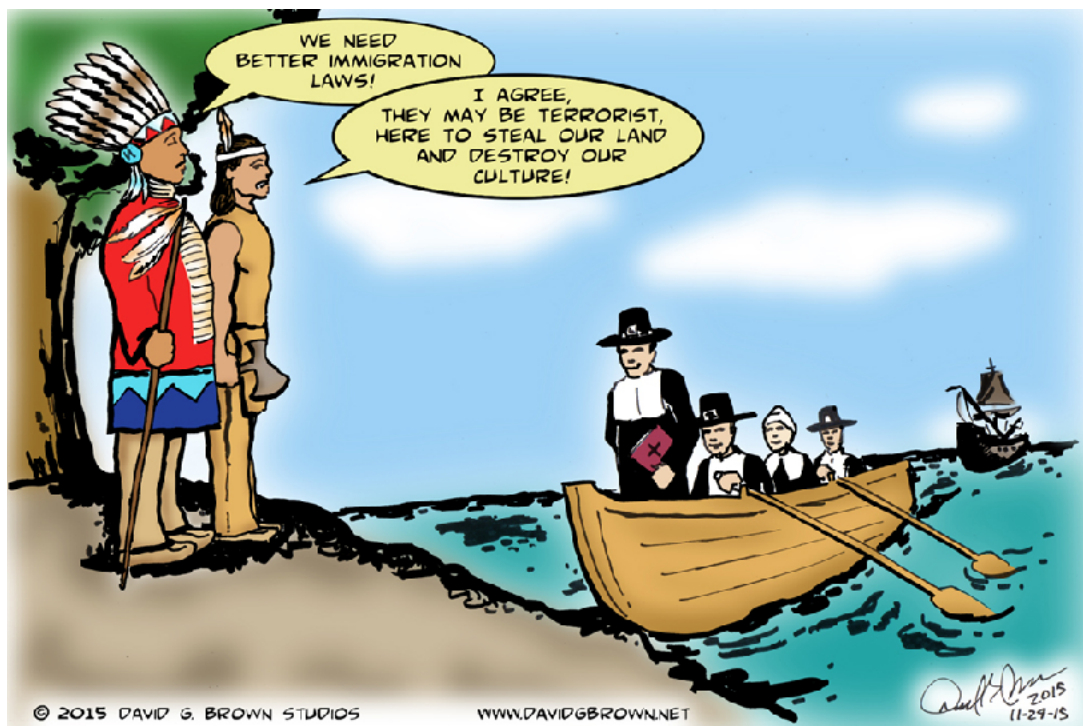
‘The use of food as a weapon is as old as written records. Siege, blockade, and starvation are well-documented military strategies, as are political strategies that use food as a tool to attract supporters and dissuade opposition’, write Messer and Cohen [[read](#)].

This article attempts to summarise here the various ways in which food has been used as a weapon throughout history. It provides examples, illustrations and references but does not have the ambition to be exhaustive.

The food weapon during colonial times

During the colonial period, local population groups were often displaced and vast swathes of land were allocated to foreign settlers, mostly from Europe.

The displacement and dispossession of indigenous peoples were particularly massive and violent during the 18th and 19th centuries in the **United States** [[read pp. 7-8](#)], **Canada** [[read in French](#)], and **Australia**, with dramatic consequences on demography.



In **Africa**, land grabbing was widespread and violent in the second half of the 19th century in Africa, especially in **South Africa**, **Kenya**, '**Rhodesia**' and **Algeria**, among others, with the settlement of a large number of European origin settlers [[read p. 5 and following](#)]. It continues nowadays under various modalities [[read](#)].

Food to 'manage' workers

Within a country, and inside companies, food also served as a means to 'manage' the workforce, following the advice given by those who believed that workers should be fed just enough to avoid hunger and keep them on the brink of deprivation. For these 'advisors', food should be used as 'a "goad" to drive people to work' [[read in French](#)].

Food trade and aid as means of influence

When 'a country has a monopoly on the export of an essential agricultural commodity or a dominant position in the market for such a commodity, it can use its management and storage methods to exert political pressure on the importing countries of this commodity', wrote A. Clément [[read in French](#)]. This is what the mercantilists did in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and more recently, this explains the implementation of the Continental Blockade of Great Britain (1806–1814) by Napoleonic France.

Since the 19th century, the **United States** began providing food aid to other countries. In the early 20th century, in the 1920s, they assisted Russia during the famine that then struck that country.

In **Germany**, as early as 1946, US leaders increasingly relied on their food power to encourage Germany to adopt Western values [[read](#)].

After World War II, the United States used their dominant position and huge food surpluses to create a global food aid system. For this, they enacted legislation known as Public Law 480 (PL480) which allowed them to become the largest provider of food aid in the world [[read](#)], directly or through the [World Food Programme](#) (WFP) founded in 1961, an agency traditionally headed by a US citizen.

Food aid was repeatedly used to influence, persuade, blackmail, or even force countries to enter the political sphere of the United States during the Cold War, especially after 1961. J.F. Kennedy summarised this in 1960 with the phrase 'food for peace' [[read](#)].

The primary beneficiaries of US food aid, in order of importance, were **India**, **Pakistan**, **South Korea**, **South Vietnam**, **Egypt**, **Indonesia**, and **Yugoslavia**, each receiving over a billion dollars' worth of food between 1955 and 1976 [[read](#)].

In **India**, the 1951 wheat loan, recommended by Truman, was intended to convince the country to align itself with the West. In this case, food aid was used to influence a country that did not have the financial resources to purchase the necessary food to deal with a famine situation resulting from the drought in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab [Sinha, 2011]. The aim was to ensure political stability and prevent any change in government that could have led to closer ties with the communist world.



Food was used in a large number of countries around the world to influence them. Food aid sometimes created a situation of dependency, with the provided food acting as a hindrance to the development of local production.

In **Egypt**, during Nasser's rule, food aid – and the threat of its interruption – was used to twist the leader's arm and attempt to steer his foreign policy in favour of Western powers [\[read\]](#). In **ex-Yugoslavia**, food was used to try to remove this communist country from the Soviet orbit.

Food power was also widely used during the wars in **Korea** and **Vietnam**. The proceeds from the sale of US food aid were spent to fund local armies.

In the 1970s, the **United States accounted for half of the world's cereal exports**. They imposed several temporary embargoes on exports to the USSR – on soybeans in 1973 and wheat in 1975 [\[read in French\]](#).

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Carter administration placed restrictions on exports to the USSR. In 1980–81, the embargo affected a portion

of the 35 million tonnes that the USSR was supposed to import due to poor harvests. Australia, Canada, and Europe committed to respecting the embargo, meaning they would not exceed their traditional trade flows with the USSR. On the other hand, Argentina and Brazil continued their exports [\[read in French\]](#).

In 1989, after the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, Bush declared that all of Iraq's imports, foodstuffs included, should be stopped, even though the country was heavily reliant on food imports, with three quarters of its food and other agricultural products, including cereals used for poultry and livestock feed, being imported [\[read\]](#). This decision was approved by the United Nations, **in violation of established norms** [\[read\]](#).¹

In 2017, Qatar was suddenly placed under embargo by its regional neighbours – an effort led by **Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates**, who severed most of its existing land, sea, and air routes. With no domestic agriculture to speak of, Qatar essentially relies on external logistical networks to maintain its food supply [\[read\]](#).

Food has been used as a means to impoverish the enemy, as shown in the **Russia-Ukraine conflict**. The Russian blockade by mining maritime routes and patrols conducted by the Russian army in the Black Sea reduced Ukrainian food exports by two thirds [\[read\]](#), with not only a significant impact on the country's finances and its ability to resist invasion, but also consequences for importing countries who had to find new sources of supply and faced higher prices [\[read pp. 8–9\]](#).²

It is clear, therefore, that the use of food was diverted to no longer be solely part of a 'prevailing consensus that famine situations are extraordinary and that they should be met by extraordinary means' that sets the standard that 'causes donors to give emergency food aid and at the same time constrains them from using it for their political self-interest' [\[read\]](#).

The use of food as a weapon in times of war

Since time immemorial, warring parties have used hunger as a weapon: imposing **sieges** to cut off food supplies,³ starving armies and populations to weaken and subdue them. They have destroyed productive capabilities by attacking crops, livestock, land, and water sources, and have not hesitated to demolish infrastructure. Ever since food aid has existed, they have made sure to block or

¹ It was only in May 2018, by adopting Resolution 2417, that the United Nations Security Council formally condemned the act of starving civilians as a method of warfare [\[read\]](#).

² The experience suggests that a complete blockade of trade flows is difficult and costly to achieve and even more difficult to maintain, with countries always finding a way to bypass it and ensure a flow of goods.

³ Among the most famous sieges in history, are the sieges of Troy (in Homer's Iliad), Jericho (in the Bible), Constantinople (1453), Leningrad and Stalingrad during World War II, and of Sarajevo (1992-1996).

divert it for the benefit of armies, and at the expense of the civilian population [\[read\]](#).

In 1941, the **Nazis** 'Hunger Plan' aimed to divert food produced in southern Russia and Ukraine to support the German army, depriving millions of Soviet citizens and creating an artificial famine. It is estimated that this plan killed 4.2 million citizens of the USSR between 1941 and 1944, mainly in **Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus**. Similar actions were implemented by the Nazis in **Greece and Poland** (including in the Warsaw Ghetto).

A decade earlier, a massive famine struck **Ukraine**, causing millions of victims, but the genocidal nature of it and the responsibility attributed to **Stalin** remain controversial.



The food weapon in 'complex emergency situations'

A 'complex emergency situation' can be defined as 'a humanitarian crisis which occurs in a country, region, or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from civil conflict and/or foreign aggression' [\[read\]](#).

These situations have multiplied over the past few decades. They are characterised by a systemic collapse of the economic, social, and political infrastructure.

When conflicts are led by undisciplined militias or armed civilians, fighters often adopt a strategy aimed at **disrupting food production and distribution** by destroying crops, attacking farmers in their fields, targeting markets, and looting food reserves. Food convoys can be attacked and destroyed to prove their control over a region and they can become a significant part of the war economy, as the economic interests of powerful groups within a society, such as traders allied with political and military elites, can benefit substantially from scarcity [\[read\]](#).

In these 'new wars' [\[read\]](#), there is a decrease in agricultural production, disruptions in markets, and diversion of food aid to deprive enemies of food to overpower them [\[read\]](#). In a way, the use of food as a weapon does not necessarily aim to conquer new territories, but rather to **control and/or displace population groups** who cannot be managed [\[read\]](#). In **Gaza**, these days (June 2025), food aid is being used to make the population move [\[listen in French\]](#), same as, for instance, in **Ethiopia** in the past [\[read pp. 525–526\]](#).

In 1993, an inventory listed 29 countries (mainly in Africa and Eurasia) facing acute food shortages ‘**as a result of armed conflicts which purposefully deliberately used hunger as a weapon in active hostilities**’, among which were Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Somalia, and Tajikistan. The degraded food situation can also result, in part, from sanctions imposed because of conflicts [\[read\]](#), sanctions that are known to disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged population groups [\[read\]](#).



The methods of deliberate famine have been or are currently being used in the **Sudan**:⁴

- In Darfur, attacks on food security have been a key part of combat tactics during the first decade of this century. Farms and villages have been set on fire, livestock looted, and people forcibly displaced, preventing them from farming their lands or herding their animals, while attacks on humanitarian workers increased [\[read\]](#).
- Food has been widely used as a weapon in many internal conflicts in Sudan [\[read\]](#), in particular the conflict surrounding the creation of South Sudan in 2011. In this conflict, the central government deliberately chose to cut off rebel-held areas from food aid. It actively hindered foreign agencies from providing assistance to its enemies, including by killing humanitarian workers

⁴ The wars in Sudan are among those forgotten, neglected wars... On 4 June 2025, a former French Minister of Foreign Affairs, in a debate on humanitarian issues, mentioned ‘the three conflicts’ currently ongoing (Gaza, Ukraine, and India/Pakistan) [\[listen in French\]](#), forgetting the multiple conflicts occurring in Sudan, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and elsewhere [\[check the data\]](#). Perhaps historical guilt, proximity, and fear of nuclear weapons explain this ‘double standard’ and blindness...

or imposing exorbitant visa and work permit fees on foreign humanitarian workers [\[read\]](#).

- It is thought that over 100,000 people died from starvation in South Sudan [\[read\]](#), while millions were forced to flee to huge refugee camps in Sudan or in neighbouring countries.
- In 2025, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that ‘nearly 13 million people have fled their homes to date, with almost 4 million crossing into the neighbouring countries’ due to the ongoing civil war [\[read\]](#).

Many countries have suffered from similar tragedies in the past few decades:

- ‘Surrender or starve’ used to be the principle enforced by Assad's army on besieged civilians in **Syria**, repeatedly blocking aid deliveries in their favour. In 2018, 54% of the country's population – 13.1 million people – relied on food aid, half of whom were in a situation of severe food insecurity [\[read\]](#)
- In **Somalia**, **northern Nigeria**, and the **Lake Chad region**, warring factions have deliberately destroyed crops in fields and food stocks, killed livestock, and blocked food supplies and aid intended for civilian populations.
- A long-forgotten conflict [\[read\]](#) has made of Yemen one of the worst humanitarian situations for nearly two decades. The delivery of aid has been hindered by warring parties, who have turned food into a strategic weapon. Agricultural infrastructure (farms, hydraulic structures, food production and distribution facilities, fishing infrastructure) has been specifically targeted by bombings carried out by the **Saudi-led coalition**. The two main ports through which food imports arrived have also been targeted and partially destroyed. Furthermore, the food flow inland is obstructed by frequent checkpoints and taxes. Food aid is diverted or resold, or its distribution is hindered, while humanitarian centres are attacked and their staff kidnapped [\[read p. 12 and the following\]](#).
- Food has also been used as a weapon on several occasions in **Ethiopia**, most recently in the conflict between the central government and the Tigray region [\[read\]](#), a tragedy marked by extreme atrocities that have only been relatively little reported in the media [\[read here and here\]](#).
- In **Myanmar**, hunger has played a role in the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas, whose rights to cultivate their land and sell their produce have been violated for decades.
- In the **Central African Republic**, Muslims have been driven out of their territories by the Anti-Balaka, and the sale to Muslims of yam, a staple food, was banned at one point in time [\[read in French\]](#).

This list, unfortunately, is far from being exhaustive...

Conclusion

This overview allows us to say that **food has been extensively used as a weapon throughout history, particularly in recent decades.**

This conclusion is no surprise.

On the one hand, food is a very special aspect of life, since **we are made up of what we eat**. Food is therefore of paramount importance – vital. It also has a symbolic significance and it is central in our cultures.

On the other hand, the evolution of the world economy has seen a significant diversification, resulting in a decreasing proportion of food produced worldwide being home consumed. Consequently, there has been a multiplication of food exchanges at local, national, regional, and global levels.⁵ The growth of trade has led to a greater vulnerability of those who no longer produce themselves what they need to live, but must acquire it in some way.

The **analysis** of the modalities, objectives, and consequences of the use of food as a weapon allows us to draw a few **lessons**, some of which may be more of a surprise. The **table in annexe** summarises the results of this analysis.

What did we find?

That the food weapon has been used and is still being used by a **large number of very diverse actors**: from well-established states with varying levels of respectability and democracy, claiming to adhere to international law, to extremist rebel groups and criminal terrorist organisations that appear less structured. This also includes inhumane private companies, and others actors.

That some actors simply **support** – more or less openly – those who are actively using food as weapon on the ground.

That the food weapon can draw on a **gamut of modalities**, some legal, others illegal, with different levels of violence and horror.

That in all cases, these actions lead to varying degrees of **degradation of the food security and living conditions** of the population groups concerned, some of whom are directly targeted, while others indirectly suffer their consequences.

That a large part of these actions can be considered as **crimes against humanity** that should no longer be tolerated in the 21st century, and at the very least they should generate the indignation and condemnation by a majority of humanity, as well as the prosecution of those who perpetrate them and those who support them, whether openly or covertly.

⁵ To illustrate this point, the volume of trade flows of food commodities has been multiplied by more than 30 times between 1960 and 2010 [[read p. 5](#)], and this trend continued since then.

And, finally, that realism must make us be aware of the fact that the **use of food as a weapon will most probably still flourish in the future**, and that humanity has presumably not yet explored all the potential modalities for doing so.

Nothing to be proud of...

Materne Maetz

(June 2025)

Annexe

Modalities	Actors	Objectives	Consequences	Examples
Land grabbing	Colonial powers, rebel groups, multinational corporations	Take contrôle of the means of producing food	Expropriation of indigenous populations, poverty, undernourishment, vulnerability. Displacement of populations.	Creation of the United States, Canada, and Australia - Colonisation of Africa in the 19th century - Land grabbing in the 19th century.
Giving to workers the means for eating only what is necessary to prevent them from going hungry.	Bosses, including the state	Use food to push people to work more	Poverty, poor quality food, profits and capitalist accumulation.	The most typical is probably Great Britain in the 19th century
Food aid	Rich states with food surplus and the various agencies they fund	Influencing 'beneficiary' countries	Political allegiance of beneficiaries, adoption of donors' values, better nutrition, change in dietary habits...	Certainly, the most typical is the food aid policy of the United States in the 20th and 21st centuries.
Restriction on the trade of food products	Rich food surplus states	Weaken enemies and competitors	Modification of food product flows, diversion of food products, price increases in targeted countries, budgetary problems and weakening...	Restriction of food exports from the United States as a sanction for the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan. Food export restriction to Iraq when it invaded Kuwait.
Food blockade (trade and aid)	Warring states - Rebel groups	Weaken enemy or adversary exporting countries - exert pressure on a population	Undernourishment in the targeted country, decrease in income for producers in the exporting country, rise in global prices, revolt, submission...	Blockade of Great Britain by Napoleon (19th century) - Blockade of Ukraine by Russia (21st century) - Countless sieges throughout history.
Destruction of means of production, transport, and storage of food, attacking people, all in order to break supply chains including those of food aid.	Warring states - Rebel groups	Weaken the enemy - overthrow their government - exert pressure on a population - make it move - eliminate it.	Undernourishment, famine, population movements, submission, revolt, economic collapse, surrender...	Multiple complex emergency situations - Assad regime in Syria - Saudi Arabia's coalition war in Yemen - Israel's war in Gaza since 2023...

To know more:

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Listen:

- [Jean-Pierre Filiu – Témoigner de la guerre “inhumanitaire” contre Gaza](#), France culture, 2025 (in French).

Website consulted:

- [ACLED, Data & Tools](#).

Selection of articles published earlier on [hungerexplained](#) and related to this topic:

- [The food situation in the Sahel is deteriorating](#), 2024.
- [Ukraine war and food crisis: facts and debates](#), 2022.
- [Sanctions Now Weapons of Mass Starvation](#) by Anis Chowdhury and Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2022.
- [International trade in agricultural commodities](#), 2014.
- [And Yemen, what have we done for Yemen and its people?](#) 2013.
- [Land: an unequally distributed, threatened but essential resource](#), 2013.

Also consult articles on our thematic pages '[Food security](#)' and '[World hunger](#)'.