

Famine as a Weapon of War: A Critical Geopolitical and Legal Analysis of Starvation Crimes in Contemporary Armed Conflicts

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Abstract

Objectives: Famine, often seen as a by-product of war, has historically served as a deliberate weapon of domination—from medieval sieges to modern conflicts like the Holodomor, Biafra, and Cambodia. In the twenty-first century, particularly after the Arab Spring, famine has acquired a geopolitical role: it is used to redraw borders and restructure power, all while being justified by doctrinal and legal narratives.

Methods: This article analyzes legal frameworks such as the Geneva Conventions and the Rome Statute, alongside case studies in Syria, Yemen, Tigray, and Gaza. It explores the gap between legal norms and enforcement, highlighting how humanitarian law is undermined by Security Council paralysis and realpolitik.

Results: Famine is not a collateral outcome but a strategic tool within broader systems of domination. International law provides legitimacy in discourse, but in practice, powerful states deploy or excuse famine under the guise of “security.” The Global South bears the greatest burden of these political famines.

Conclusions: To address this imbalance, the article calls for a shift from legal prohibition to geopolitical analysis and collective prevention. It proposes international conferences led by NGOs and global intellectual networks to critically map famine as a tool of power and to challenge the structures enabling its continued use.

Keywords: *Accountability; Famine; Geopolitics; International law; Weapon of war*

1. Introduction

The notion of food security was officially proposed in 1974, at the inaugural World Food Conference (WFC). The geopolitical context at the time was very favorable: an agricultural crisis in key exporting countries (most notably the United States and Canada), as well as famines in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and the Sahel. The fear of a global food shortage led to a narrow understanding of food security, reduced primarily to a question of supply: the priority was to increase production. In this climate of urgency, the specter of Thomas Malthus reemerged—he had argued, as early as 1798, that humanity, like all living species, tends to grow its population beyond what natural resources can sustain (Marc Dufumier, 2008, p.927).

Indian economist Amartya Sen, who won later the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998, talked about how important fairness and people's access to means of production and resources were as early as the late 1970s (Britannica. The Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2025). Being poor frequently means not being able to make decisions, not being seen as a full citizen with rights, and not having your needs taken into account. So, to make food security better for everyone, we need to give marginalized populations more power to: negotiate the allocation of goods, get access to means of production, manage natural resources, and work (Katre & Raddatz, 2023, p.2).

This understanding is inherently political; it demands public action whenever markets fail. This approach necessitates the official recognition of the right to food, which is part of the larger economic and social rights. The idea is to provide individuals with the ability to feed themselves. It is a key demand for social and grassroots movements. As a human right, this entitlement entails a state obligation to respect, protect, and implement this right.

According to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966, affirms the principle:

“The States Parties to the present Covenant, recognizing the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger [...], shall take the necessary measures for the realization of the right to adequate food [...], and for improving methods of production, conservation and distribution of foodstuffs [...].” (UN, 1966).

Food security is no longer a problem isolated to the Global South. It has become a global issue, and it is at this level that the right to food must be secured. However, in several armed conflicts, famine has demonstrated that it is more than just an outcome of war (Munialo & Mellor, 2024, p.5). It was and is used purposefully as a strategic weapon to destroy civilian resistance, weaken enemies, and redefine territory. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly following the Arab Spring protests, this weapon has acquired a geopolitical dimension, serving to reshape political maps (Saccone & Vallino, 2025, p.15).

This use of starvation emphasizes the harshness of military power dynamics, and, above all, the limitations of international legal mechanisms designed to protect vulnerable communities. In the current context, symbolized by the return of wars in Ukraine, Syria, Tigray, and, most famously, Gaza, famine has once again become a prominent topic of humanitarian and legal debate (Dapo Akande & Emanuela-Chiara Gillard, 2019, p.4). International institutions, notably the United Nations (UN), the International Criminal Court (ICC), and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), emphasize that deliberately imposing famine on populations is a serious violation of international humanitarian law (IHL). Despite the

availability of explicit provisions, such as the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions and the Rome Statute, their execution remains unequal and inadequate .

The use of famine as warfare, despite the fact that the practice is steadily being outlawed in line with the stipulations of international humanitarian law, is still being employed with worrying frequency in international and domestic armed conflicts. Famine has in most of the recent events, not been a byproduct to war but a calculated effort to undermine populations, cause displacement, or re-define control over territory. It creates a core contradiction: how could this go on in a legal order that literally outlaws such actions as war crimes? This gap has been filled in the study by analyzing the political, structural, and legal obstacles to preventing and prosecuting famine as a weapon of war.

This article is focused on following the path of famine toward the establishment of an international crime in the military method of warfare. It adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology to synthesize legal interpretation of the international humanitarian law (Geneva Conventions, Rome Statute, ICESCR), the critical theory of geopolitics, and the historical-comparative case studies of the Holodomor, Biafra, Cambodia, Yemen, Tigray, Ukraine, and Gaza. In order to justify this, we have come up with two maps illustrating famine as a direct consequence of armed conflicts: one in the 20th century, the other in the 21st. Two comparative tables were used to evaluate the way the situation, the legal framework, and the actors participating in it have changed over time. The article ends by stating the constant problem of how to make sure that the use of famine as a weapon can be held accountable and the severe necessity to empower the international prevention, enforcement, and reparative mechanisms.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Foundations

2.1 Famine, an Ancestral Military Tactic Legitimated

First, we would like to define famine according to Sen where he does not define 'famines' although he refers to various definitions but prefers to use it and the related term 'starvation' "in their most common English sense". What is the difference between famine and starvation? Starvation is then used in the sense of people going without adequate food, and famine as a peculiarly virulent manifestation of it, causing widespread death. From this, it follows that "famines imply starvation, but not vice versa".

Although famine and hunger are used interchangeably in the general discourse, they are used as different realities in either the humanitarian or legal circles. Hunger is a condition that has been present in humans; these people are always short of food to satisfy their basic nutritional needs in nutrition. Structural factors, including poverty, inequality, conflict, poor governance, or a deficiency in access to food systems, are usually responsible. Hunger is long-term, extensive, but not necessarily a life-threatening condition(Weldemichel, 2024,p.3).

Famine, on the other hand, is a severe and sharp expression of hunger, usually characterized by mass starvation, malnutrition, population displacement, and mortality. It is mostly localized, time-constrained, and linked to disastrous food insecurity. Famines can be caused by clustering of events, that is, natural cataclysms, economic shocks, or intentional political and military interventions(Oxfam, 2025).

Notably, famine is controllable, especially in the case of war. It entails not just food shortage but also organized denial of access to food, water and basic resources. Although Hunger is normally structural, famine may be used as a weapon, particularly in cases where

states or armed entities deliberately interfere with food systems or hinder humanitarian efforts(De Waal, 2025).

This difference is crucial to the analysis of law: although starvation can be evidence of state neglect or failure, the use of starvation against civilian populations is a war crime in that it is additionally employed during conflict according to international humanitarian law(Kemmerling et al., 2022,p.5).

The use of famine as a tool of war goes back to Antiquity. Besieging armies quickly understood that depriving a city of food and access to water could be more effective than direct confrontation. Thus, in 146 B.C., the Romans reduced Carthage to famine before destroying it. This strategy, aimed at defeating the enemy without direct battle—survived for generations

Long sieges were a common method of warfare during the Middle Ages. Fortresses were encircled, surrounding farms destroyed, and inhabitants denied of supplies. These techniques show that hunger has long been seen as a psychological weapon as well as a physical one: it destroys morale, weakens resistance, and incites internal revolts that facilitate capitulation. The modern era did not put an end to this tactic. On the contrary, it further institutionalized and industrialized it. During the American Civil War (1861–1865), the Lieber Code, ratified by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, explicitly authorized the starving of enemy populations, considered a means of control. The Lieber Code, drafted to define for the Union army the limits of hostilities, stipulates that it is “lawful to starve hostile belligerents, armed or unarmed,” and that the army may force fleeing civilians to return to a besieged area “to hasten surrender.” It was only in 2015 that the United States Department of Defense formally abandoned these provisions. This text illustrates how, until the 19th century, famine was legitimized within Western military doctrines.

Nevertheless, this was not merely a conceptual doctrine. The Atlantic powers actively employed mass famine as a weapon of war during the two World Wars through their rigorous naval blockades.

The 20th century marks a dramatic turning point: famine ceases to be a simple collateral effect and becomes a central instrument of state policy. The most striking case remains the Holodomor (1932–1933), the great famine orchestrated by Joseph Stalin in Ukraine. Through massive confiscations of harvests and the prohibition of population movements, the Soviet regime deliberately deprived millions of Ukrainian peasants of food. Historians estimate that this policy caused between 3.5 and 5 million deaths. The Holodomor is today recognized by several countries as a genocide.

Similarly, the Hunger Plan, elaborated by Nazi Germany during the Second World War, aimed to starve millions of Soviets in order to reorganize the living space of Eastern Europe. Between 1941 and 1944, around 4.2 million civilians perished from hunger under the combined effects of blockades, agricultural requisitions, and systematic destruction of infrastructure.

The United States even called its program to surround Japan in 1945 Operation Famine. In the 1950s, similarly, Great Britain referred to the type of mass movement of its people in a British colony, British Malaya, as a response to communist guerrillas. During the drafting of the Geneva Convention, which was among the most important documents governing the laws of war, the United States and Great Britain opposed the idea of clearly banning the use of famine as a war tactic. This ruling was an effective extension of the validity of famine in military conflicts for decades.

Other authoritarian regimes used famine to reshape society toward the end of the twentieth century. Cambodia under Pol Pot (1975–1979) exemplifies this drastic instrumentalization. Within the scope of his "Year Zero" project, which attempted to transform Cambodia into an equitable agrarian society, he forced enormous population displacements and denied people access to food. This approach resulted in the deaths of over 2 million people—nearly one-quarter of the population (Springer, 2010,p.124).

These examples from history demonstrate that famine is rarely a natural disaster; rather, it is frequently the product of political and military decisions. It is thus situated at the crossroads of military strategy, ideology, and social dominance systems.

3. The Evolution of Famine in International Law

3.1 Legal Evolution and International Codification

3.1.1 The first attempts at regulation

Until the nineteenth century, famine as a tool of warfare sparked little ethical or legal controversy. The customary law of war regarded civilian people as an essential component of the war effort and so valid targets (Conley & De Waal, 2019,p.702). This is represented by the Lieber Code (1863), which codified the legality of such practices.

During the 20th century world wars, new law and ethics issues appeared. For instance: During World War I, starvation killed hundreds of thousands of German citizens because of the Allied blockades (MARY ELISABETH COX, 2012, p.3). Similarly, during the Second World War, famine was systematically employed both by Nazi Germany and by the Allied powers (Duncan et al., 2021).

Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), introduces the term “right to adequate food”, which is now widely used, refers to one of several binding treaties that give legal force to the principles outlined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (*The Right to Food Guidelines*, 2006).

The ICESCR, along with General Comment 12, adopted by the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights provides a positive right to an adequate standard of living, including the progressive realization by states to provide "food in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture" (*The Right to Food Guidelines*, 2006).

3.1.2 The Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions (1977)

The world community fully mobilized during the 1970s, following the famines in Biafra (1967-1970) and Bangladesh (1971-1974). In 1977, two Additional Protocols were added to the Geneva Conventions, representing a significant role on the negative right to adequate food

Article 54, Paragraph 2 of Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Convention 1977 explicitly prohibit “using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare,” as well as the destruction, removal, or rendering useless of objects indispensable to their survival, such as foodstuffs, crops, or water installations (ICRC, 1977b).

Similarly, Article 14 of Additional Protocol II of the Geneva Convention 1977, related to non-international armed conflicts, establishes a similar prohibition, emphasizing that the protection of civilians applies regardless of the conflict’s nature (ICRC, 1977a).

These provisions reflect an important evolution: famine is no longer perceived as collateral damage but as an illegitimate and prohibited method of warfare (Geneva Conventions, 1977). These actions demonstrated the need for enhanced legal regulation. However, in order to maintain their military freedom of action, the United States and the United Kingdom rejected the inclusion of an explicit ban on famine as a weapon of war in the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

3.1.3 *Criminalization by the International Criminal Court*

The Rome Statute, adopted in 1998, established the International Criminal Court (ICC) and integrated famine into the list of war crimes. Article 8(2)(b)(xxv) criminalizes “intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival.” (Tom Dannenbaum, 2022). At first, this provision applied only to international armed conflicts.

However, an amendment adopted in 2019 broadened the definition: Article 8(2)(e)(xix) now extends criminalization to famine in non-international armed conflicts (UN, 2021). This evolution is crucial, as the majority of contemporary conflicts fall under this category (e.g., Syria, Yemen, Tigray).

The International Criminal Court defines famine broadly, indicating not only lack of food, but also loss of water, shelter, and medical care (UN, 2021). This approach represents the foundation that human survival depends not only on nourishment but also on a minimal set of fundamental living conditions.

The Rome Statutes also prohibit “willfully impeding relief supplies” to persons harmed by conflict and under undue stress, repeating Additional Protocol I, Article 70 of the Geneva Conventions. Therefore, in such cases, the failure to facilitate speedy transit of supplies, equipment, and personnel, or unlawful denial of approval for emergency relief, would constitute a war crime. Furthermore, in instances of total or widespread occupation, the occupying military must agree to humanitarian help. In contested territories, the UN Security Council may impose binding measures requiring warring parties to agree to humanitarian relief (ICRC, 2018).

On 24 May 2018, the United Nations Security Council took a historic stand. With the unanimous adoption of Resolution 2417, the international community condemned the deliberate use of starvation as a weapon of war, classifying it as a war crime and calling on all parties in conflict zones to guarantee humanitarian access (UN, 2018). Thus, this led us to the following questions: What are the elements of a war crime of intentional famine of civilians?

The intentional famine war crime is a complex combination of several factors that have to be proven to criminally criticize a person. These aspects are grouped into three, which are contextual, physical (*actus reus*), and intentional (*mens rea*).

The contextual factors are that the conduct under consideration had to take place as a part of an armed conflict of an international or non-international nature. Moreover, it should be demonstrated that the defendant had knowledge of the factual situation that formed the existence of that armed conflict. This contextual connection is fundamental to qualify the act as one of the international humanitarian law. The physical aspects, *actus reus*, entail denying the civilians access to items essential to survival (OIS). These are food, water, shelter, and medical attention. The destruction or removal of such essentials is declared in Articles 54 of

the Additional Protocol I and 14 of the Additional Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions that inform the interpretation of OIS. Any act that limits access to OIS by civilians can be considered a deprivation. This can involve the intentional interference with the provision of humanitarian assistance, assault, or the destruction of infrastructure or supplies that are needed to survive, or even omissions, i.e., failing to take the required steps to make sure that civilians may receive these resources. Critically, the determination of this war crime does not imply that the civilians should actually perish because of a lack of food, but the focus is on deliberately depriving the civilian population of resources needed in the indispensable resources (UNHR, 1949).

The voluntary (*mens rea*) includes the demonstration of the state of mind of the perpetrator during the crime. In particular, it should be demonstrated that the perpetrator had the intent to rob civilians of OIS. This intent could be proved by direct intent, i.e., the intent of the perpetrator was to cause such deprivation, and indirect intent, i.e., the perpetrator should have known that their actions would, in the ordinary course of things, cause such deprivation and that the items withheld were necessary to the survival of civilians. Moreover, the perpetrator should have been aiming to employ famine as a form of warfare; that is, the individual either would have deliberately sought to let famine happen or knew that famine would probably ensue as a consequence of their actions (Contemporary Criminal Law, n.d.). Notably, the motive of creating famine does not have to be the only aim of the offender. In spite of the possible restricted level of pursuit of famine with other legal or illegal military objectives, the crime is nonetheless proven in case the required intentional elements are shown beyond a reasonable doubt.

3.1.4 International custom and human rights

Beyond treaties, famine as a method of war is now widely recognized as a rule of customary international law. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) codified this in its database on customary IHL, through Rules 53 and 54, which prohibit both the starvation of civilians and attacks against objects indispensable to their survival (ICRC, 2018).

Moreover, several United Nations bodies have stressed that the deliberate imposition of famine constitutes a serious violation of fundamental human rights—most notably the right to life (Article 6, ICCPR) and the right to food (Article 11, ICESCR) (UNHR, 1966).

Thus, at the normative level, the prohibition of famine as a weapon of war is well-established and robust. However, the persistence of this practice in recent conflicts shows that the problem lies less in the law's existence than in its effective enforcement.

4. Historical and Emblematic Case Studies

4.1 The Holodomor in Ukraine (1932–1933)

The Holodomor—literally translated as “extermination by hunger”—represents one of the most documented cases of political famine in the 20th century. Between 1932 and 1933, several million Ukrainians died as a result of the forced collectivization policies imposed by Joseph Stalin.

The Soviet government carried out massive confiscations of harvests, imposed unattainable quotas, and prohibited movements outside the starving zones. Any attempt to seek food beyond the villages was repressed by force. The famine was therefore not a climatic or

economic accident, but rather a deliberate strategy to crush Ukrainian nationalist aspirations and consolidate the regime's power (Ganson, 2009,p.48).

To this day, several countries and national parliaments recognized the Holodomor as an act of genocide, although debate remains intense within the international community.

4.2 The Nazi Hunger Plan (1941–1944)

During the invasion of the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany in 1941, the high command implemented the Hungerplan, or “plan of hunger”; an ideological and economic project explicitly aimed at starving millions of Soviets in order to facilitate German colonization of Eastern Europe(Weisz, 2021,p.2).

In practice, blockades were imposed, food stocks confiscated, and Soviet cities deliberately deprived of resources. It is estimated that about 4.2 million civilians died of hunger as a direct result of this policy(Duncan Green, 2022).

This plan constitutes a key stage in the history of famine as a weapon of war, for it brought together racial ideology, military strategy, and economic planning into a single, coordinated project.

4.3 Biafra (1967–1970)

The Biafran war in Nigeria (1967-1970) constitutes one of the first contemporary conflicts, in which famine was deliberately employed as a strategic weapon and recognized as such by international opinion(Heerten & Moses, 2014,p.174).

The Nigerian federal government imposed a food and medicine blockade on the secessionist region of Biafra, preventing the delivery of food and medicine. This blockade caused the death of about one to two million people, most of them children, due to starvation and malnutrition(Nweke, 2024,p.191).

The images broadcast by international media showing skeletal children mobilized public opinion and contributed to the emergence of a new humanitarian movement, most notably embodied by the creation of Médecins Sans Frontières.

4.4 Cambodia under Pol Pot (1975–1979)

Under the Khmer Rouge, hunger was not merely a consequence of economic disorganization but a deliberate instrument of social and political engineering. By abolishing money, emptying the cities, and brutally collectivizing land, the regime transformed access to food into a tool of total control. Populations reduced to mere survival became entirely dependent on the state apparatus for subsistence(Maartje Weerdesteijn, 2018).

From a critical geopolitical perspective, the Cambodian experience shows how famine can be used as a radical biopolitical project: reshaping an entire society by disciplining bodies through deprivation. This case also illustrates the ambivalences of the Global South: a regime born from the anti-colonial struggle but ultimately reproducing internal structures of domination through the militarization of hunger.

4.5 Bangladesh (1971–1974)

The Bangladesh famine reveals another dimension: the role of institutions and political choices in the making of hunger. While floods and natural disasters contributed to the crisis, it was above all speculation, corruption, and poor state management that turned a food crisis into

a nationwide tragedy. Amartya Sen's analysis demonstrates that famine is not only a question of availability, but of access and distribution, and thus is deeply tied to power relations (Dowlah, 2006, p.346).

From a critical standpoint, this famine illustrates the structural dependence of a fragile postcolonial state on international institutions and the dynamics of the Cold War. Bangladesh in the 1970s thus became a laboratory: hunger there served both to expose the failures of governance and to justify humanitarian intervention and the imposition of economic reforms that deepened long-term dependency (Akhand Mohammad Akhtar Hossain, 2001, p.30).

5. Famine in Contemporary Geopolitical Conflicts

5.1 Syria: the "modern sieges"

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, famine has been used as an instrument of war and a method of collective punishment. Entire cities, such as Aleppo, Homs, Daraa, and Eastern Ghouta, were besieged for months, even years (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022, p.958).

Syrian government forces, but also some armed groups, prevented the delivery of food, water, and medicine, thus reducing entire civilian populations to famine. In 2021, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, mandated by the UN, described these practices as "modern sieges reminiscent of the Middle Ages" (Fox & Watkins, 2022, p.9).

5.2 Yemen: famine as a war of attrition

The war in Yemen, ongoing since 2015, has become one of the most serious humanitarian crises in the world. The coalition of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates used air and sea blockade which severely limited the inflow of food, fuel and medicine. On their side, the Houthis hindered the distribution of humanitarian aid in areas under their control (Center for Preventive Action, 2025b). The World Food Program, estimates that 17 million Yemenis suffer from acute food insecurity, including 2.2 million children suffering from severe malnutrition. Bombings destroyed agricultural and logistical infrastructures, further worsening the country's heavy dependence on imports (UN, 2022).

This famine is used both as a military weapon, intended to weaken the adversary, and as a political weapon, designed to punish populations associated with the opposing camp.

5.3 Tigray (Ethiopia): a planned famine

Since November 2020, the region of Tigray has been the theater of a violent conflict opposing the Ethiopian government, its Eritrean allies, and the rebels of the Tigray People's Liberation Front. The government imposed an almost total blockade: closure of banks, cutting communications, destroying agricultural infrastructure, and prohibiting the circulation of humanitarian aid. Human Rights Watch denounced this as a strategy of "deliberate starvation" — the use of hunger as a weapon of war (Center for Preventive Action, 2025a).

According to the UN, more than 5 million people were plunged into severe food insecurity, and hundreds of thousands of civilians died as a result (United Nations, 2022).

5.4 Gaza: famine as a geopolitical tool to redraw the map of the Middle East

In reaction to the Hamas attack of October 7, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, on October 9, 2023, announced his desire to change the Middle East, suggesting a larger-scale geopolitical reorganization in response to what had happened (Reuters, 2023). This

vision was not novel. Netanyahu previously said in his September 2023 speech at the UN general assembly that the Abraham Accords had prepared a New Order in the Middle East. These were their open statements indicating that the military action against the Hamas attack was ingrained in a bigger ideology and political system (*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Vows to “change Middle East” as Hamas Threatens to Execute Captive Israelis*, 2023).

After the attack, Israel has placed a complete blockade on the Gaza Strip. Top officials, such as Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, and Energy Minister Israel Katz, issued direct statements declaring that the civilian population of the Gaza Strip would not have access to food, water, and fuel (Human Right Watch, 2023). These were not mere threats; but they became a reality in organized military interventions that sought to hinder the provision of basic human needs and hamper humanitarian efforts. Human Rights Watch has thus denounced the Israeli government for employing starvation as a war weapon, a practice that is outrightly banned in international humanitarian law. Article 8 of the International Criminal Court Rome Statute proclaims the purposeful starvation of civilians by denying them the objects that they need to live, such as by deliberately blocking the provision of relief (Human Right Watch, 2023).

The level of the problem is seen in first-hand testimonies gathered in southern Gaza among the displaced Palestinians between November and December 2023. A man who escaped the North side of the enclave said: We had no food, no electricity, no Internet, nothing. It is unknown how we managed to survive (*“Hopeless, Starving, and Besieged” Israel’s Forced Displacement of Palestinians in Gaza*, 2024). Other people talked about the water shortage, the queues in front of the bakeries bombarded, and the scandalous prices of the remaining food. Humanitarian data support these testimonies. On December 6, 2023, the World Food Programme (WFP) reported that 90 percent of households in the north of Gaza and two-thirds of them in the south had skipped at least one entire day of food. The WFP had already cautioned of an urgent threat of famine days prior, owing to the fact that the food supply system of Gaza was practically destroyed (WFP, 2023). The Norwegian Refugee Council reported disastrous water, sanitation, and hygiene conditions through the closure of desalination and wastewater treatment plants after the shortage of fuel.

These measures are also under the category of collective punishment under international law, which is illegal in Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Being an occupying force, Israel has the legal duty to provide food and medical supplies to the civilian population. All these facts lead to a calculated policy of weakening the civilian population by denying it of the most fundamental needs, which is a war crime according to the international legal system (UN, 2023). To these moves, various humanitarian agencies have called on the international community to denounce these acts, as well as to suspend military aid to Israel until these acts are stopped.

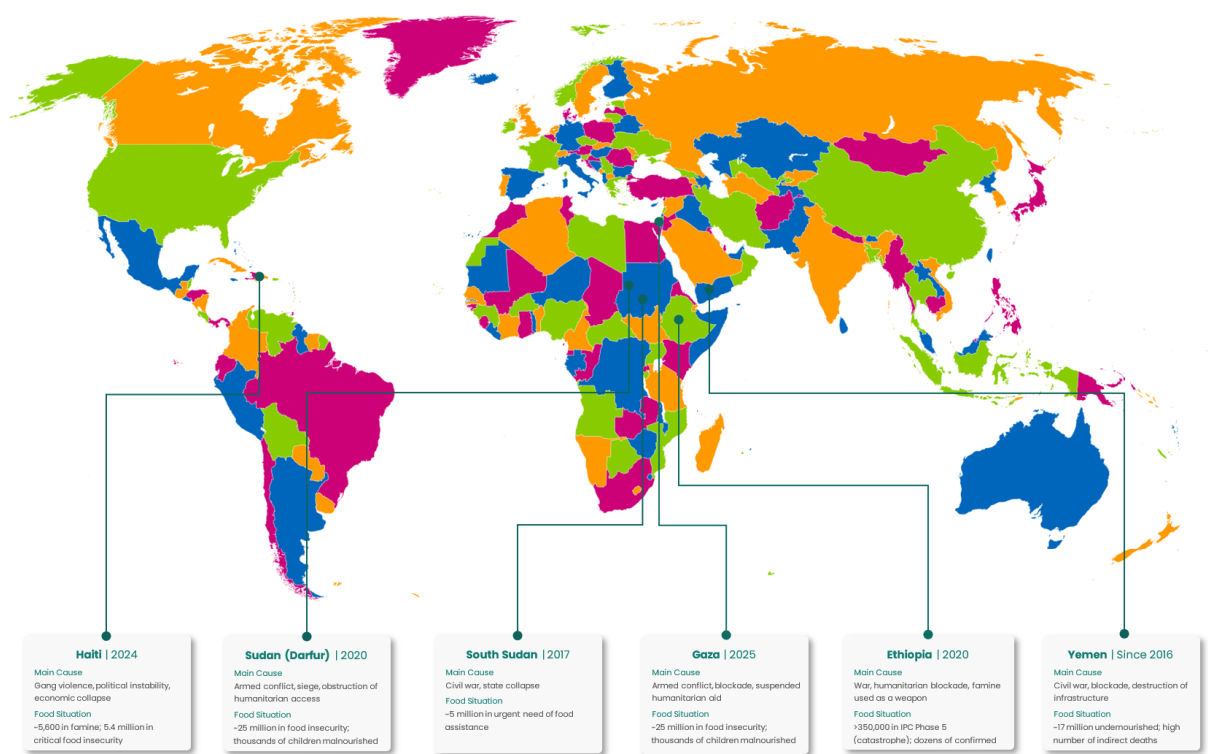
There is also a second geopolitical agenda behind the weapon of war, famine, as it has its own humanitarian consequences as well. This is a larger initiative that may be broken down into three significant elements. First, there is the vision of Greater Israel (Jeremy Bowen, 2025). When Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke on i24NEWS in August 2025, he again affirmed his adherence to the concept of the Greater Israel, including not only the Palestinian Territories and East Jerusalem, but also extending the territory into parts of Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. He identified the vision to be a historical and spiritual mission (UN, 2025).

Secondly is the authorization of the civilian displacement. Recently, Netanyahu made reference to a draft that would enable Gaza civilians to go free, a statement that numerous analysts viewed as a euphemism for the forced displacement of the population. This spoke out against any efforts at ethnic cleansing (*Arab Parliament Condemns Netanyahu’s Call to Displace Palestinians, 2025*).

Third is the population transfer proposal, which is in partnership with Donald Trump. In July 2025, Netanyahu and former U.S. President Donald Trump spoke publicly about a plan to repatriate Palestinians of Gaza on a voluntary basis, a contentious plan that has been widely criticized as being an instance of forced transfer being under humanitarian guises (*Arab Parliament Condemns Netanyahu’s Call to Displace Palestinians, 2025*).

Such contemporary cases do not stand alone. Famines as a result of armed conflicts, intentional blockades, and political manipulation have occurred numerous times in the history of humanity. The following map and comparative tables put the present crisis in Gaza and other recent cases into perspective by giving a historical view of famines caused by conflicts throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

Table 1: Summary of Conflict-Induced Famines in the 20th Century (author’s map)

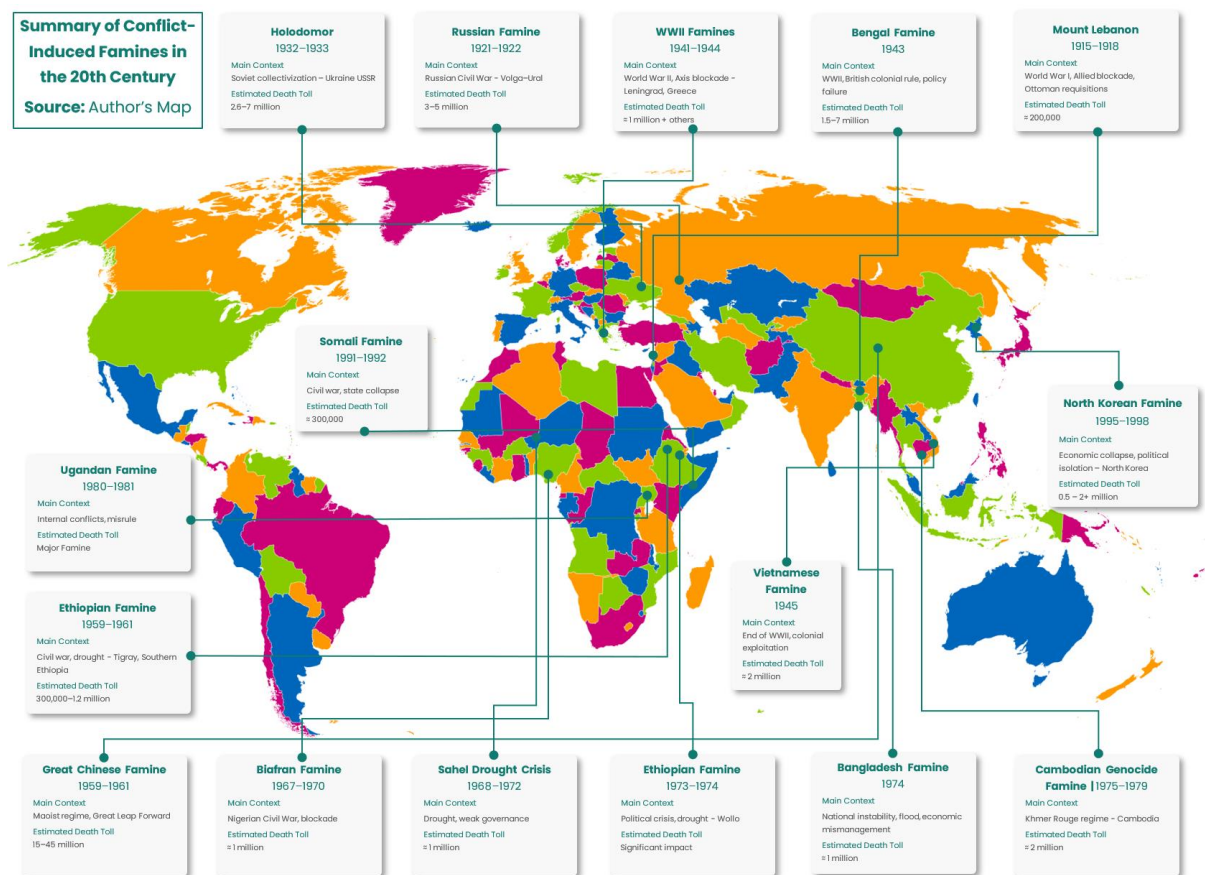


Conflict / Period	Region	Main Context	Estimated Death Toll
Mount Lebanon Famine (1915–1918)	Mount Lebanon	World War I, Allied blockade, Ottoman requisitions	≈ 200,000

Russian Famine (1921–1922)	Volga–Ural	Russian Civil War	3–5 million
Holodomor (1932–1933)	Ukraine (Holodomor), USSR	Soviet collectivization	2.6–7 million
WWII Famines (1941–1944)	Leningrad, Greece	World War II, Axis blockade	≈ 1 million + others
Bengal Famine (1943)	Bengal	WWII, British colonial rule, policy failure	1.5–7 million
Vietnamese Famine (1945)	Vietnam	End of WWII, colonial exploitation	≈ 2 million
Great Chinese Famine (1959–1961)	China	Maoist regime, Great Leap Forward	15–45 million
Biafran Famine (1967–1970)	Biafra (Nigeria)	Nigerian Civil War, blockade	≈ 1 million
Sahel Drought Crisis (1968–1972)	Sahel (Africa)	Drought, weak governance	≈ 1 million
Ethiopian Famine (1973–1974)	Wollo (Ethiopia)	Political crisis, drought	Significant impact
Bangladesh Famine (1974)	Bangladesh	National instability, flood, economic mismanagement	≈ 1 million
Cambodian Genocide Famine (1975–1979)	Cambodia	Khmer Rouge regime	≈ 2 million
Ugandan Famine (1980–1981)	Uganda	Internal conflicts, misrule	Major famine
Ethiopian Famine	Tigray, Southern Ethiopia	Civil war, drought	300,000–1.2 million

(1984–1985)			
Somali Famine (1991–1992)	Somalia	Civil war, state collapse	≈ 300,000
North Korean Famine (1995–1998)	North Korea	Economic collapse, political isolation	0.5–2+ million

Table 2: Summary of Conflict-Induced Famines in the 21st Century (Authors map)



Region	Period	Main Conflict / Cause	Critical Food Situation
Yemen	Since 2016	Civil war, blockade, destruction of infrastructure	~17 million undernourished; high number of indirect deaths
Ethiopia (Tigray)	Since 2020	War, humanitarian blockade, famine used as a weapon	>350,000 in IPC Phase 5 (catastrophe); dozens of confirmed deaths

Sudan (Darfur)	2023–2025	Armed conflict, siege, obstruction of humanitarian access	~25 million in food insecurity; thousands of children malnourished
Gaza	2025	Armed conflict, blockade, suspended humanitarian aid	~500,000 in famine; UN refers to a “man-made famine”
South Sudan	2017	Civil war, state collapse	~5 million in urgent need of food assistance
Haiti	2024	Gang violence, political instability, economic collapse	~5,600 in famine; 5.4 million in critical food insecurity

6. Old and New Challenges of International Justice and Accountability

6.1 Old Challenges

6.1.1 The difficulty of proving criminal intent

One of the main obstacles in prosecuting famine crimes lies in proving intentionality (*mens rea*). For famine to be legally qualified as a war crime, it must be demonstrated that the military or political authorities deliberately and systematically used the deprivation of essential goods as a method of warfare. However, in practice, actors often justify their actions by invoking “military necessity” or “national security,” which makes the distinction between an indirect consequence and an intentional strategy difficult to establish (*Practice Relating to Rule 129. The Act of Displacement*, n.d.). Despite the normative progress made in codifying the right to food and prohibiting starvation in armed conflict, the enforcement of these legal instruments remains limited. The following table (Table 3) provides a synthesis of key international frameworks that affirm and protect the right to food in both peacetime and wartime contexts.

Table 3: Key international legal instruments protecting the right to food in peacetime and during armed conflict.

Category	Peacetime	Wartime
Legal Domain	International Human Rights Law (IHRL) Provides <i>positive rights</i> – the right to something	International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Provides <i>negative rights</i> – the right to be free from something
Foundations		
Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)	Outlines fundamental rights and freedoms for all individuals, promoting equality,	

	dignity, and justice worldwide.	
		Geneva Conventions (1949) Establishes standards for humanitarian treatment in war, protecting civilians, prisoners, and setting rules to limit brutality.
		Additional Protocol I (1977) Strengthens Geneva protections for civilians in both international and non-international conflicts. • <i>Article 54(2)</i> : Prohibits attacking or destroying objects essential for civilian survival (e.g., food, crops, livestock).
Enforcement		
International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966)	Legally binding treaty building on the UDHR. • <i>Article 11</i> and <i>General Comment 12 (1999)</i> : Obligates states to progressively realize the right to adequate food.	
		Rome Statute (1998) Establishes the ICC and its ability to prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity. • <i>Article 8(2)(b)(xxv)</i> : Criminalizes starvation of civilians as a method of warfare.
UN Security Council		
		Resolution 2417 (2018) Condemns the use of food as a weapon of war. • Requests the UN Secretary-General to report when conflict-induced famine or food insecurity risks emerge.

6.1.2 *The limits of the International Criminal Court*

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has jurisdiction to try famine crimes, but its action remains severely limited. Its territorial jurisdiction is restricted to State Parties or to cases referred by the UN Security Council. Its investigations are long and costly, and the collection of evidence in war zones is extremely difficult and often incomplete. The ICC is also subject to strong political pressures, which limit its independence in certain sensitive cases (Dr. Ray Murphy, 2025,p.5). As a result, very few prosecutions have been carried out despite the clear normative recognition of the crime.

6.1.3 National and regional initiatives

Some European countries have incorporated into their domestic law the prohibition of famine as a war crime. France, Germany, Norway, and Sweden have even opened investigations into famine crimes committed in Syria and Ukraine. These initiatives rely on the principle of universal jurisdiction, which allows a State to prosecute certain serious crimes (genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes), even when they are committed outside its own territory (Chase Sova, 2024).

6.2 New Challenges

6.2.1 Geopolitical and geostrategic obstacles

The greatest dilemma occurs when a State, which has been officially charged by international organizations and humanitarian NGOs with using famine as a tool, comes out publicly and officially to declare its commitment to continue using this method to further its geopolitical interests. This project is commonly described as sacrosanct, in which there is ideological or doctrinal justification. What we have in these instances is the danger of increasing the level of geopolitical tensions, which are contrary to the principles of international humanitarian law. In this regard, the concept of famine reveals a certain paradoxical nature of international law (*In Light of Israel's Increasing Starvation Crimes, Famine in Gaza Strip Must Be Officially Declared*, 2024). The legal norms denying the use of starvation as a warfare tool are clearly laid down in international law, but the possibility of their application depends on the political will and collaboration of States. The problem of stalemates in the UN Security Council is far more problematic when dealing with major powers, as with Ukraine or Gaza. This lack of touch provides the insight that has come to be seen in the long standing discrepancy between the legal status of famine as a war crime and the truth on the ground capacity to prosecute those responsible (ICRC, n.d.).

6.2.2 Towards a more global approach: prevention and reparation

The war against the weapon of war of famine should not just be the criminal prosecution but involve a full-scale prevention and restoration approach. This will involve strengthening early warning mechanisms run by such agencies as the FAO, WFP, and the Food Security Information Network (FSIN), which is very important in the detection and mitigation of food crises as they arise. Protection of humanitarian action is also of great importance; the activities should be purely based on humanitarianism rather than military intent to guarantee access and impartiality in war-torn regions (Weldemichel, 2024). Furthermore, restorative justice requires the supporters of the victims of famine to assist them in the reconstruction of agriculture on a long-term basis and provide fair compensation of the respective communities. There is also a part in diplomatic and economic actions, such as the issue of arms embargo or the provision of military aid to those States that actively use famine as a weapon of war (WFP, 2023).

7. Conclusion

The use of famine as a weapon of war illustrates the brutality of modern military strategies and the limits of the international system. Far from being a natural fatality, famine is often the product of deliberate human decisions: blockades, agricultural destruction, and confiscations of food. History – from the Holodomor to the Hungerplan, from Biafra to Cambodia – shows that famine is an ancient weapon, but still current. The recent cases in Yemen, Tigray, Ukraine, and Gaza confirm that this practice remains a tragic and persistent reality. International law has clearly evolved, with the prohibition enshrined in the 1977 Additional Protocols and in the Rome Statute of the ICC. Yet, the gap between the texts and their application remains immense. Prosecutions are rare, and civilian populations continue to bear an exorbitant cost.

A complex and decisive action is needed to stop famine as a waging of war. This involves the intensification of accountability measures to help put the perpetrators behind bars in court, the use of better coordination among the international community to protect the lives of the civilian population in the areas of conflict, and most importantly, the establishment of the real political will by the international community to punish the States and actors who purposefully use starvation as a war weapon. Such will be limited to statements of principle but must be concretized through the holding of international conferences, initiated by humanitarian organizations in partnership with bodies composed of intellectual elites of various nationalities. These meetings would aim to collectively develop geopolitical maps of domination and famine practices, in order to produce a reference booklet. This document would constitute a practical basis for reflection and mobilization within an international awareness of the vital issues that threaten populations throughout the world.

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