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Starvation as a Form of Indiscriminate Violence: Explaining Israel's Use of a Starvation Policy in Gaza after October 7th, 2023

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Starvation as a Form of Indiscriminate Violence: Explaining Israel's Use of a Starvation Policy in Gaza after October 7th, 2023

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INTRODUCTION

On the 29th of February, 2024, at least 118 Palestinians were killed and 760 were injured after Israeli forces opened fire on civilians seeking food from aid trucks in Gaza City, the disaster quickly got named the “flour massacre” (Cordall et al., 2024). A little over a month later, seven aid workers from the World Central Kitchen were killed in an Israeli air strike in Gaza, after stating to have communicated their location with the Israeli Defence Forces (Abualouf, 2024). Moreover, Oxfam Novib reported in March 2024, that there have been “numerous attacks by Israeli forces on aid convoys, humanitarian facilities, and the offices of international NGO’s” (Oxfam International, 2024), going so far as to blocking humanitarian aid from entering the Gaza Strip. This blockage of humanitarian aid has drastically worsened the living conditions for civilians, with food shortages causing almost two million people to be on the brink of famine. These acts of war have caused numerous NGO’s, United Nations’ and European Union figures to accuse Israel of deliberately weaponizing starvation in Gaza (Whyte, 2024). Furthermore, several international organizations have concluded that the violence Israel has perpetrated can be interpreted as genocidal violence.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have both brought about reports expressing their grave concerns regarding the safety of the Palestinian people in the Gaza strip, and the possible extermination of all Palestinians in Gaza, who have become a “besieged population” facing “starvation, displacement and annihilation amid relentless bombardment and suffocating restrictions on life-saving humanitarian aid” (Amnesty International, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025). As of August, 2025, the Israeli offensive has killed nearly 62,000 Palestinians, according to the Hamas-run Health Ministry (Chater, BBC, 2025). It was shown by an analysis of the UN Human Rights Office that close to seventy percent of these victims have been women and children (Moench, 2024). Many of the men being killed are also non-combatants who are being killed due to presumed capacity to fight (Semerdjian, 2024). These instances of violence by the Israeli regime can be categorized as indiscriminate violence, violence with no selection of specific victims.

Though violence of the Israeli regime against the Palestinian people is not unprecedented, historically it has not been as violent as it has been since the attack by Hamas on October 7th, 2023, when militants broke through Israeli security systems and carried out a terrorist attack on Israeli soil, killing at least 800 Israelis, wounding 2300, and taking 251 hostage (International Crisis Group, 2023 & BBC News, 2025). After this attack, Israel launched a full scale invasion in Gaza, with the intention of freeing the hostages held by Hamas, “cut the group down to size or even remove it from power.” (International Crisis

Group, 2023). At the time of writing, over two years after the start of the war in 2023, a ceasefire has come into effect. However, the aftermath effects of the starvation policy that was, and still is, perpetrated by Israel is felt in all levels of Palestinian society (Amnesty, 2025).

This thesis does not intend to answer the question of what type of violence is being played out by the Israeli regime, nor does it intend to go into the question of whether or not the most recent violence can be categorized as genocide or try to prove the intent behind the violence. The mere scale of the violence indicates the violence to be indiscriminate. This thesis understands the violence occurring in the Gaza Strip since October 7th 2023, as a form of indiscriminate violence in a strategy of civilian victimization by the Israeli regime, which fits into the pattern of violence that has been observed previously in the conflict and by the Israeli regime. The use of indiscriminate violence, specifically in the form of starvation as a method of warfare, depriving a population of humanitarian aid, is puzzling. Ordinarily it is understood that these methods of warfare are not necessarily effective methods in winning a war. Taking all this into account, the question this thesis intends to answer is:

How can Israel's indiscriminate violence, in the form of a starvation policy, including the deprivation of humanitarian aid in Gaza since October 7th, 2023, be explained?

Indiscriminate violence can be understood as violence that targets everyone in a specific place, with no efforts to determine someone's innocence or guilt (Downes, 2007). In general, indiscriminate violence is understood to be less effective than selective violence. Three explanations for why this violence then does occur are that it is perceived as an effective counterinsurgency strategy, that it helps the perpetrator to politically survive, or that it is ideologically motivated. This thesis intends to find out which of these explanations best explains the indiscriminate violence, in the form of a starvation policy perpetrated by Israel in Gaza after October 7th, 2023. Through process tracing, an examination of all three explanations will be made. Using a set of observable explanations, based on the three explanations a careful analysis will be made by looking at different moments of escalation and de-escalation in the starvation policy, during the first year of the Israeli attack on Gaza. This will be done by looking at the causality of this change and policy and at the framing of the justification of the policy.

Though there has been other research about possible explanations behind the use of starvation as a method of war, academically the connection between starvation and explanations for indiscriminate violence has not been made. This thesis attempts to make this

connection and then use the given academic explanations for indiscriminate violence to explain the use of starvation in a socially relevant, unique case. Answering this question will therefore be academically and socially relevant in providing us with new insights about indiscriminate violence and what that means in era of warfare.

What becomes clear from this analysis, is that the Israeli starvation policy can best be explained through the political explanation of indiscriminate violence. However, it also follows a pattern, led by denial. Straight after the October 7th attacks, Israeli officials do their best in justifying the war, and specifically the starvation policy built on the three different explanations. However, after a while, the starvation policy and specifically the consequences this has for Palestinian civilians, is actively denied. This makes the policy harder to explain, but does provide us with interesting understandings of the charges that starvation carries.

This thesis will proceed as followed. Firstly, starvation as a policy will be contextualized as a form of indiscriminate violence in the literature review. Then, three explanations for indiscriminate violence derived from the academic literature will be provided and made feasible with observable implications in the methodology. In the analysis, the first year of the war in Gaza in 2023-2024 is analyzed following escalations and de-escalations of the starvation policy, concluding that though all three explanations sometimes fit, overall the political explanation seem most fitting. More importantly however, is the pattern established regarding international pressure and denial of the starvation policy by the Israeli regime.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Starvation as a form of indiscriminate violence

Since the start of the Israeli attack in Gaza on October 7th, the world has been shocked with footage coming out of the region showcasing the extent of starvation of Gazan civilians, with the entire population in Gaza is facing high levels of acute food insecurity (British Red Cross, 2025). The famine, or risk of famine, present in Gaza, is not because of natural disaster, it is a man-made disaster, caused by the deprivation of humanitarian aid by the Israeli government, weaponizing starvation. This is not a new phenomenon. All throughout history, starvation has been used by parties to force their enemies to surrender (Hutter, 2015). Through sieges, blockades, or even sabotaging of crop fields, populations have been brought to submission by being deprived of food. However, through international humanitarian law, the deliberate starvation of civilians is prohibited. The deliberation behind starvation of a war method, however, is hard to prove, and therefore, is hard to prosecute. What is clear within international humanitarian law, and echoes through the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2417 is that all parties during times of conflict are obligated to allow the “safe, timely and unhindered access for humanitarian assistance to all areas and to facilitate access to essential imports of food, fuel, and medical supplies” (Zappalà, 2019, p. 883).

However, this is not what can be observed when looking at real life cases. Actors in armed conflict have not always allowed humanitarian assistance to come into conflict areas, and when they do, civilians are not adequately protected when attempting to reach this aid. One of the most prominent examples of this, is the case of Biafra, when a major famine was caused by the Nigerian state’s blockade of the self-proclaimed separatist Republic of Biafra in the country's east between 1967-1970 (Heersten & Moses, 2014). Readers and audiences in the West in particular were confronted with photographs of starving children, much like 2025 photographs coming out of Gaza, caused not by a natural disaster, but by a man-made siege (Heersten & Moses 2014). A more recent example is Yemen, where the Houthi’s weaponize humanitarian aid for political purposes, abiding by one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world (Makara, 2023). Furthermore, during the Syrian Civil War, the Regime used starvation as a tool of war because it provided a low-cost and convenient means of exerting pressure on besieged populations and created divides between the civilian population and armed fighters (Bakkour & Stansfeld, 2024).

Starvation refers to the most extreme form of hunger (Lander & Richards, 2019), but entails more than just the deprivation of food. Starvation can be approached as both a

process, and the outcome of said process. The outcome of starvation means the “deprivation of food unto death” (Conley & de Waal, 2019, p. 700). This outcome is very rare, even during famine. The process of starvation, however, is one that occurs much more often. When starvation is used as a method of warfare, it is being done so in a transitive manner, it is a “process of deprivation that occurs when actors impede the capacity of targeted persons to access the means of sustaining life” (Conley & de Waal, 2019, p. 700). This implies that starvation is not just necessarily only the deprivation of food and water, but the deprivation of all essential things necessary to enjoy liveable conditions. This entails “medical supplies, clothing, shelter in certain climatic conditions, or objects needed to harvest and process food” (Fornari, 2022, p. 83).

Starvation does not always lead to famine, or death for that matter, but can have a multitude of consequences for a population, such as a decrease in fertility or health levels amongst the population. Aside from physical aspects, starvation can also have a negative effect on the social bonds within a society (Conley & de Waal, 2019). An important aspect of starvation is that it takes a very long time. It can take months, and often years, to starve an individual and to reduce a population to famine (Conley & de Waal, 2019; Lander & Richards, 2019). In short, starvation can be understood as the destitution of essential goods necessary for people to live under healthy circumstances. In this thesis, within the context of the Israeli attack on Gaza, the “starvation policy” implemented by the Israeli government therefore does not simply entail the deprivation of humanitarian aid, but also entails carefully aimed attacks at actors intended to preserve the humanitarian situation on the ground, such as hospitals and aid workers. These attacks all negatively impact the essential things necessary to enjoy liveable conditions, and therefore enforce starvation.

As stated earlier, starvation can, and has been, utilized as a war method all throughout history, but this does not mean that it is allowed. Protocol I Article 54 of the Geneva Conventions states that: “starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited” (Thomas, 2005, p. 110). However, there are instances in which starvation can be considered a ‘legal’ method of war, should it only be applied to other military or armed groups. If civilians in that case are also victims of the starvation tactic, the illegality of this is quite ambiguous (Thomas, 2005). The Geneva Conventions in this sense failed in not recognizing the different forms of tactics that can be used for starvation.

From a human rights perspective, the motivation behind a violation is not relevant (Hutter, 2019), but for starvation of civilians to be prohibited under international humanitarian law, it needs to be proven that the “intent must have been specifically to starve the civilians rather than combatants” (Whyte, 2024, p. 9). This also brings in the debate on who is a civilian and who is not. According to the Geneva Convention, a civilian is someone who is not a member of the armed forces. However, often a large group of the population is somewhat involved in the war effort, making it possible for actors to argue that starvation as a war method is justified (Thomas, 2005).

An occupying power has the responsibility to protect the people it occupies, and therefore must agree to facilitate humanitarian relief (Bashi, 2016). In the case of Israel-Gaza, this would mean that the Israeli government has a responsibility to protect the Palestinian people living in the Gaza Strip (Semerdijan, 2024). The Gaza Strip is understood as an area of 363 square miles (Brittanica), twice the size of Washington (Smith, 2018) located between Egypt and Israel, with at the time of writing an estimated population of 2,1 million. More than a million of these, approximately 47%, are children under the age of 18 (Al Jazeera, 2025). The Gaza Strip has been under Israel’s direct and indirect control since 1967, when the Israeli forces won the Six Day War (Levy 2017; Scott-Baumann, 2023). Israeli forces seized Gaza from Egypt, and the West Bank from Jordan, controlling all of what had once been Mandatory Palestine (Scott-Baumann, 2023). By doing this, Israel became an occupying power with a responsibility to provide aid when needed. However, occupying parties, in this case Israel, often do not facilitate humanitarian relief. In this case, Israel claims it has no responsibility for Gaza’s civilians, because it fears that doing so would “provide Hamas with a military advantage” (Whyte, 2024, p. 10).

After 2005, when Hamas formally came into power, Israel imposed an economic blockade on the Strip, barring its inhabitants from overseas travel by overseeing its border crossings, and impeding the construction of both a seaport and an airport in Gaza (Smith, 2018; Levy, 2017). It continued to control the movement of people in and out of the territory, the supplies of water, fuel and electricity. The electricity dependency oftentimes means lack of power which affects “businesses, hospitals, and sanitation facilities, contributing to high levels of unemployment (Scott-Baumann, 2023, p. 226). Furthermore, Israel controlled the airspace, making it possible to monitor Palestinian action on the ground. Israel continued to carry out aerial bombardments and assassinations, and interfered with radio and television

broadcasts (Scott-Baumann, 2023). This all makes that Gaza has been referred to by international leaders and foreign analysts as an “open air prison” (Filiu, 2024).

The reasoning against providing aid as an occupying power, as stated above by Israel, echoes through many parties’ justifications for the blocking of humanitarian aid, the fear that it would end up on the belligerents side. Claire Thomas (2005) argues that starvation tactics attack civilians directly, whereas civilian casualties from direct military attacks are usually secondary consequences. In this logic, the only time starvation should be used is when non-combatants can be isolated from the armed forces. This contrasts the argument described above, in that the reasoning for parties to block humanitarian aid is because non-combatants cannot be isolated from the armed forces. This way, the blocking of humanitarian aid, which could lead to starvation, could be justified.

2.2 What is indiscriminate violence and the logic behind it?

Because of the indiscriminate value of starvation, civilians are often victims of this violence. This thesis focuses on such violence, namely the intentional killing of civilians, or civilian victimization. In modern warfare, the killing of civilians is often part of a deliberate policy of mass killing against noncombatant populations (Valentino, Huth & Balch-Lindsay). The distinction between combatant and non-combatant has become increasingly vague, with civilians being declared as “collateral damage” and “human shields” (Semerdjian, 2024). Particularly in Israel's war against Hamas, civilians have been increasingly targeted and victimized. Civilian victimization can be defined as “a wartime strategy that targets and kills (or attempts to kill) noncombatants” (Downes, 2006, p. 156). It is not limited directly to killing, but also includes deaths caused for example by starvation, exposure, or disease during forced relocation or forced labour (Valentino, 2004 p. 10).

Civilian victimization can be either selective or indiscriminate. Selective violence is violence limited to people who actually provide material support to the opponent (Downes, 2007). Therefore, selective violence entails the "personalization of violence and requires information that is asymmetrically distributed between political actors and individual civilians” (Kalyvas, 2007, p. 173). The main takeaway from this definition by Kalyvas, is that selective violence is costly, which causes actors to lean towards another type of violence, the indiscriminate kind. Within this reasoning, indiscriminate violence occurs when it does, because it is cheaper than its counterpart. Indiscriminate violence can be defined as violence that targets everyone in a particular place with no efforts to determine innocence or guilt

(Downes, 2007). This entails that it targets people on the basis of identity, regardless of their behaviour (van der Maat, 2020). These people are usually an outgroup, an ethnicity, religion, or class that is not part of the governing coalition.

Civilian victimization and therefore indiscriminate violence has become quite common in modern warfare, which is surprising as there is a widespread belief that killing innocent civilians is morally wrong and it is widely believed to be a bad strategy of war. The spread of international norms over the last few decades against human rights violations has furthermore made indiscriminate violence even less desirable for those who use it. Moreover, indiscriminate violence rarely helps the perpetrator achieve its goals and has the possibility of being counterproductive by strengthening the opponent's will to resist (Downes, 2012). Therefore, despite being cheaper than its counterpart, it is often agreed upon that violence against civilians is more effective when it is not indiscriminate, but selective.

Why then does indiscriminate violence occur? Civilian victimization during wars used to be largely dismissed as simply being collateral damage, irrational and not part of an actual military strategy. This perspective has changed over time. Kalyvas (2007) argues that indiscriminate violence logically occurs when it does, because it is much cheaper than selective violence, and relatively easier to carry out. Selective violence is costly because it requires specific information on individuals' actions and allegiances, which is difficult information to acquire. Furthermore, not only is the information harder to acquire, carrying out specific attacks is also more costly and will take more time to prepare. So, indiscriminate violence is therefore more likely to emerge when there is a "lack of information and selection criteria are tough" (Kalyvas, 2007, p. 150).

Apart from the idea that indiscriminate violence is beneficial in a costly manner, there is also a certain logic behind the use of indiscriminate violence that Kalyvas (2007) defines. In short, the logic of indiscriminate violence entails that "if the 'guilty' cannot be identified and arrested, then violence should target 'innocent' people that are somehow associated with them" (Kalyvas, 2007, p.??). The 'innocent' will then either force the 'guilty' to change their behavior, or the 'guilty' will change their behavior themselves once they realize the impact their actions are having on the 'innocent' people (Kalyvas, 2007). Though indiscriminate violence can be considered cruel and vile, it is not lacking in logic. Still though there are several reasons for it being considered ineffective, outside of it simply being a costly strategy.

Kalyvas identifies a couple of mechanisms for why indiscriminate violence does not work, some of which are relevant for the Israeli case. Firstly, indiscriminate violence provokes an emotional reaction as it is perceived as deeply unfair. Therefore it may have backfiring effects and actually has the possibility of aggravating insurgencies. This emotional reaction can leave “lasting, bitter memories, which time does not erase” (Anderson, 1995, p. 43) which can then produce the desire for revenge, possibly armed. Secondly Indiscriminate violence has an ambiguous structure of incentives, it is unclear how civilians should act in order to prove that they are not collaborating with the rebels. This implies that instead of coercing the “innocent” to positively influence the “guilty”, indiscriminate violence actually brings in recruits for insurgents. Through this reasoning, indiscriminate violence can be considered merely a short-term solution. Furthermore, indiscriminate violence oftentimes overestimates the strength of political ties between political actors and civilians. The logic of indiscriminate violence assumes that civilians are able to lobby against armed actors to convince them to decrease the level of their activity; and conversely, that armed actors care about these civilians. However, insurgents are usually aware of the risks they force on the civilian population, and are therefore unwilling to stop fighting because of them. Specifically if this civilian population is from an area with weak links to the insurgents (Kalyvas, 2006).

2.3 Explanations for the use of indiscriminate violence

As stated earlier, using starvation as a war method can be understood as a form of indiscriminate violence, which was earlier defined as violence that targets everyone in a particular place with no efforts to determine innocence or guilt (Downes, 2007). Though the “logic of indiscriminate violence” (Kalyvas, 2007) can explain why it would be beneficial for perpetrators to utilize indiscriminate violence, it says little about the different reasons why this logic is utilized during times of war. Within this research, the explanations are divided as such; indiscriminate violence occurs because it is perceived by the perpetrator as a legitimate military strategy; indiscriminate violence occurs because of the perpetrator’s wish to politically survive, and; indiscriminate violence occurs because of the ideological conviction of the perpetrator.

Indiscriminate violence occurs because it is perceived by the perpetrators as an effective counterinsurgency strategy.

This explanation states that indiscriminate violence occurs with the intention to control or coerce a certain population. This argument used to contradict the general understanding that violence against civilians was based on irrationality and driven by sadism, but now has quite

widespread support (Valentino, et al., 2004). Valentino, Huth & Balch-Lindsay, 2004 argue that intentional killing of civilians during war is often a calculated military strategy designed to combat powerful guerrilla insurgencies (2004). The idea of controlling however, can also go further, meaning that the perpetrator's goal is not just to get the civilians to be on a certain side, but also to influence their future, which then aligns more with literature on genocide and ethnic cleansing, as the intent is to specifically target a certain ethnicity or group of people.

The idea that indiscriminate violence occurs because of the perpetrator's perception is an effective form of counterinsurgency, can be considered a strategic logic, as it is part of the perpetrator's military strategy based on military necessity. This implies that it can sometimes be considered to be legitimate to kill civilians in the course of normal military operations (Bellamy, 2012). Mostly, in counterinsurgency operations, this is justified with the idea that civilians on the ground are responsible for their decision to support rebels and that killing civilians is necessary to achieve justifiable war aims (Bellamy, 2012, p. 161). This last idea aligns with the blurring of the lines between combatants and noncombatants as they were originally established in the Geneva Convention.

Bakkour and Stansfield (2024) analyzed the use of indiscriminate violence, namely the uprooting of civilians using displacement tactics, by the Syrian Regime as being part of an established military and political strategy, instead of being primarily concerned with ethnic cleansing. Valentino (2004) also believes that an understanding of mass killing must begin with the specific goals and strategies of high political and military leaders, stating that regimes seeking to defeat guerrilla insurgencies can be attracted to using mass killing as a military strategy in an effort to control the civilian population and to isolate guerrillas from their civilian support (Valentino, 2004, p. 6).

There are limitations to this strategic logic, as with the motivation to control the population, indiscriminate violence will only succeed under certain circumstances. Downes (2007) establishes that indiscriminate violence is more effective the smaller the underlying civilian population, and the smaller the size of the geographic area in which the war is fought. Furthermore, indiscriminate violence is more likely to be more effective than selective violence when the population is committed to the insurgents' cause (Downes, 2007). Oftentimes however, this connection is overestimated, which causes indiscriminate violence to be ineffective as it only causes repercussions (Kalyvas, 2006). In this case, the geographic argument fits, as Gaza is a small area in which the violence is taking place. However, the

underlying civilian population condition does not work, as Gaza has quite a big population, making it harder to control or coerce. Furthermore, in the case of Gaza, civilians are committed to the insurgent's cause, the establishment of a Palestinian state, and support for Hamas throughout the war has declined, with only a fifth of the population supporting the organization in March 2025 (Burke, 2025). There is strong evidence to states resorting to mass killing in an effort to defeat insurgencies, but in practice this strategy does tend to produce mixed results (Valentino, Huth & Balch-Lindsay, 2004). If there is a possibility of reaching the same goals in a different manner, there is a higher chance of governments taking those possibilities.

Applying this logic onto the presented case, where the Israeli state uses starvation through deprivation of humanitarian aid as a form of indiscriminate violence, it would suggest that Israeli leaders perceive starvation as a military necessity. This implies that starvation and siege are used as tools of coercion to weaken the adversary side, in this case Hamas. This means that starvation is used, not as end goals itself, but as a tool to destroy Hamas, for example by reducing Palestinian civilian support for the Hamas fighters.

Indiscriminate violence occurs because of the perpetrator's wish to politically survive.

Political survival is phenomenon present in both democracies and autocracies, but the explanation differs slightly. Though Israel can be defined as a democracy, it is still interesting to look into the arguments connecting political survival and indiscriminate violence from an autocratic point, as some of the mechanisms could still apply. Furthermore, using the dark side of democracy theory, it can be argued that democracy often leads to violent ethnic cleansing to make the society more homogeneous.

In theory, one would expect democracies to engage in civilian victimization less than autocratic regimes, however this is not necessarily the case. Democratic institutions promote democratic values, which promote tolerance, nonviolence and respect for legal constraints. This suggests that democracies wage their wars in a more humane manner than autocracies. Furthermore, democracies provide a sense of checks and balances in which citizens and opposition elites can be expected to be more sensitive to appeals of human rights and international legal principles on the laws of war. Through these, we could expect democratic citizens to be more likely to pressure their governments to uphold those rights, also during war times (Valentino, Huth & Balch-Lindsay, 2004; Downes, 2012). Furthermore, because

of the wish of democratic leaders to be re-elected , one could expect pressure from civilians to actually have an impact on the way democratic leaders act during war times.

It is however, also these democratic institutions, that can influence democratic regimes to abuse humane warfare. One could argue that democracies stand to profit more from a quick and short war, than autocratic regimes do. Democracies could then be more likely to target noncombatants because the vulnerability of leaders to public opinion makes them wary of incurring heavy costs on the battlefield for fear of losing support at home (Downes, 2012). This argument falls in line with Kalyvas's idea of indiscriminate violence occurring when costs have the possibility of being too high. Democracies would have a higher desperation to win a war with additional pressure in this case coming from electoral institutions of accountability. This may force leaders to take measures to reduce losses and deliver victory, even if this means violating the structures of liberal norms. This provides us with a potential "dark side of democracy", as institutions designed to ensure domestic peace and tranquility could actually lead to democratic regimes perpetrating injustices abroad (Downes, 2012). This argument was further devised by Michael Mann (2005) and includes an ideological element around the striving towards a homogeneous society, which will be discussed later.

The idea of democratic regimes aspiring to have low losses in war, is one that has been quite apparent in the Western way of waging war post-Vietnam, and one that Israel specifically has utilized in its former wars in Gaza. This is the idea of transferring risk from soldiers to enemy civilians to reduce their own casualties, and therefore the political costs stemming from the growing domestic social sensitivity to casualties. Risk transfer is accomplished "by using excessive lethality with relatively limited discrimination between combatants and noncombatants" (Levy, 2017, p. 117). Or in other words, by pursuing civilian victimization through indiscriminate violence. Throughout Israel's earlier operations in Gaza between 2006 and 2014, Israel had the goal of shortening the war. In achieving this, Israel nearly doubled the number of Gaza civilians the troops killed for every Gaza combatants and Israeli soldiers (Levy, 2017). Israel can be considered a typical case study of a democracy whose society is increasingly less tolerant of casualties among its soldiers battling a nondemocratic entity, and therefore portrays as a good example of the possible dark side of democracy. It should be noted, however, that Israel does face pressure from the international community to respect the immunity of noncombatants, which can be considered an example of democratic international institutions protecting humane warfare.

Political survival can, as explained above, be connected to democracies and therefore expose a dark side of democracy, but it is also apparent in autocratic regimes. Here, regimes do not crave the support of a democratic electorate, but do need support from autocratic elites to stay in power. This was further devised by van der Maat (2020), who argued that “authoritarian leaders faced with elite rivalry might adopt mass indiscriminate violence to strengthen their support coalitions and weaken those of rivals to ensure survival” (van der Maat, 2020, p. 780). Though Israel is not an example of an autocratic regime struggling for survival, an argument could be made for elite rivalry to also be existent within Israel's political system, with current prime minister Netanyahu reaching for support within its government coalitions at the extreme right side. Furthermore, it has been argued that Israel has experienced democratic backsliding from 2009 to 2021, specifically under the rule of Netanyahu, comparable to what has been occurring in Hungary and Turkey (Oren & Waxman, 2022). Altogether, when leaders are determined to stave off defeat and are very much unwilling to make major political concessions to the opposition. Leaders may still resort to mass killing, as it is simply the most attractive strategy for the state. Regime type seems to have an insignificant influence on the choice behind this strategy (Valentino, Huth & Balch-Lindsay, 2004).

To understand why this political motivation can be relevant for the Israeli case, one must understand the status of Israeli politics before the October 7th attacks, and the criticism Israel received right after the attacks. Prime Minister Netanyahu has long faced corruption charges, alleging bribery, fraud and breach of trust. These corruption allegations have critically shaped his governance style and contributed to democratic tensions in Israel's political system (Center for the Advancement of Public Integrity, 2018; Kingsley, 2025). Additionally, the war has granted Netanyahu a reprieve from a corruption trial and Israel's biggest-ever protests, denouncing his government's judicial overhaul plan, that were running weekly for most of a year until 7 October. In 2023, Netanyahu's far-right government was also facing unprecedented mass demonstrations, after pushing for a sweeping judicial overhaul (K. Smith et al., 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024). Within the context of this political climate, the military established warned that this unrest was undermining Israel's national security (Staff, 2023). Following the Hamas attack on October 7th, allegations were made against Netanyahu's government that they had failed to act on security warnings and adequately protect civilians (Al Jazeera Staff, 2025). The attacks damaged Netanyahu's popularity even more, some even calling for his resignation, but they did rally the Israeli

public around the war effort. So, with the Israeli public increasingly calling on Netanyahu to step down, deep splits within the war cabinet on how to prosecute the war and frustration among military officers with the lack of a day-after plan, Netanyahu could certainly have an interest in dragging out the war to remain in power, in line with the political logic for indiscriminate violence. (International Crisis Group, 2024). Domestically, the criticism weighed most heavily on the Israeli government, has been there lacking of returning the hostages home (Tian, 2025).

Following this political logic, the question arises whether or not the starvation policies served domestic political legitimacy in Israel. A mechanism behind this explanation would be that Israeli leaders maintain or escalate the siege on Gaza to demonstrate control after the appeared failure on October 7th. Starvation in this sense would not be an end in itself, but would serve as a tool to regain domestic credibility for the Netanyahu government.

Indiscriminate violence occurs because of the ideological conviction of the perpetrator.

The ideological argument does not imply that it is just ideology, or just strategy that motivates perpetrators to utilize indiscriminate violence to further their goals, but that they cannot be studied separately from each other. Though ideology might have a strong influence, it would not occur without other strategic elements in play. However, these strategic elements would not express themselves in mass indiscriminate killing, would it not be for the ideological element. Maynard (2022) argues that mass killing “is best understood as a form of ideologically radicalized security politics”. When mass killing occurs, features of security politics have become radicalized by extreme hardline ideological worldviews. Strategic circumstances and situational pressures are still crucial, but whether or not they actually encourage mass killings “depends upon the internalized and structural ideologies of individuals, groups, and organizations” (Maynard, 2022, p. 55). In short, Maynard states that though ideology is not necessarily the driving factor behind mass killing, indiscriminate violence cannot be understood without the ideological element.

Other ideological explanations for indiscriminate violence place ideology at a higher importance level than Maynard. What can be apparent in perpetrators who use ideology as reasoning for their indiscriminate violence, is the belief that one is fighting an uncivilized enemy (Downes, 2012). Valentino (2004) argues that leaders have an ideological preference for the extermination of groups that they perceive as a threat to their vision of society. Ideology in this sense may shape elites’ threat perception and understanding of a conflict

Valentino (2004) presents his argument to be strategic, but also has important ideological elements. For example, aside from his counterinsurgency argument, Valentino further argues that mass killing can be an attractive strategy for regimes seeking to achieve the radical communization of their societies and for regimes seeking to implement policies of large-scale ethnic cleansing. Though these can be strategic goals, radical communization and ethnic cleansing are widely considered to be ideologically motivated, and therefore fit into this category.

The idea of ethnic cleansing being ideologically motivated, goes together with another justification and reasoning behind mass killing found by Bellamy (2012), namely the ideology of selective extermination, which was developed into a system of thought during the European colonial era. This ideology argues that there are certain groups of people who ought to be excluded from moral and legal protections normally owed to humans. This set of ideas that was used to justify for example the Holocaust, shares structural similarities to those developed by European colonialists (Bellamy, 2012). Selective extermination to its core however, is universally inapplicable, as the ideology bases itself on societal division. It can therefore count on strong validation within the host community, but it is often not considered a plausible justification for mass killing outside of that community (Bellamy, 2012).

Selective extermination ideology is something we could observe in the most recent Gaza war, with Israeli extreme right politicians calling Palestinian victims “human animals” (Goldenberg, 2024). The linking of people to animals is a form of dehumanization that is frequently associated with genocidal conflicts (Haslam, 2006). Dehumanization involves denying a person “identity”, a perception of the person “as an individual, independent and distinguishable from others, capable of making choices” (Kelman, 1976).

Lastly, the dark side of democracy theory by Michael Mann understands nations undergoing democratization to possibly be more susceptible to mass indiscriminate violence because of their goal to make the society more homogeneous (Mann, 2005). Though Israel cannot be considered to be a country undergoing democratization, it can be argued that Israel has motivation to make its society more homogeneous, as the mere existence of Palestinian people can be considered an existential demographic threat, as it threatens the loss of the Jewish majority in the State of Israel (Michael, 2009). Abulof (2014) found that focusing on a Zionist securitization of demography, there is a longstanding history of both leaders and the

general public within Israel to hold this “demographic demon” as endangering the very existence of the Jewish State (Abulof, 2014, p. 412).

In the Israeli case, several authors argue that some schools of Zionism have historically framed Palestinians as a collective threat to the the Jewish state, thereby lowering normative and moral constraints on the use of force (Pappé, 2006; Gordon, 2008). This way, military violence can be justified as necessary for demographic control. Applying this ideological logic onto the presented case, the question becomes whether or not ideological convictions enabled or justified starvation. In this explanation, siege and starvation would be justified through dehumanizing or collective-blame framing. This framing would depict all Palestinians in Gaza as complicit or part of Hamas, and would most importantly include some form of ideology, either explicit or implicit.

What all these explanations for indiscriminate violence have in common, is the fact that reaching for indiscriminate violence in war time, is almost always a strategy of last resort and therefore a final solution. Mann (2005) argues that it is rare to find evil geniuses plotting mass murder from the very beginning, and that it is rarely the intent of the perpetrators. This is because of the low likelihood of indiscriminate violence succeeding. Bellamy (2012) argues that perpetrators generally resort to mass killing only reluctantly and only when other strategies have proven ineffective or prohibitively expensive. Bellamy (2012) argues that this reluctance to kill civilians as a first resort can be best explained because we find it difficult to justify to ourselves and to others, and the fear that it will prove counterproductive. The latter is something also identified by Kalyvas (2006), Downes (2007), and Valentino (2004), who argue that perpetrators of mass violence could be concerned about potential retribution and third party intervention.

METHODOLOGY

This research consists of a single-case study, as it aims to specifically explain the use of starvation and deprivation of humanitarian aid as a form of indiscriminate violence by the Israeli state in the Gaza Strip since October 7th, 2023. Within this case, three explanations are examined. Through congruence process tracing, each explanation will be carefully tested. Using observable implications for each explanation, a careful case study will be conducted to examine which explanation best answers the question.

Each explanation provides us with different observable implications. For the first explanation, that the starvation is used because of military necessity, we would firstly expect the siege or blockade on Gaza to be tightened at the same time as combat operations by Hamas rise, as much of the strategic literature bases itself on the idea that insurgents fight back. Consequently, we would expect the areas most impacted or attacked by the siege and aid restrictions, to be areas where geographically Hamas is proven to be most active. We would expect the siege and blockade to be framed as a necessity to pressure Hamas and as necessary to prevent the aid from ending up in the hands of Hamas militants. To prove this explanation, we would have to find evidence that decision-makers in Israel ultimately see the civilian suffering as a military necessity.

To prove the second explanation, that starvation is used because of the will to politically survive by the Israeli government, we would expect escalations in restrictions of aid to coincide with domestic political crises regarding the government's legitimacy. This could be general crises aimed towards the entirety of the government, but it could also be more specific crises of legitimacy regarding Benjamin Netanyahu and his corruption scandals. Furthermore, we would expect a framing of the starvation policy focused around the return of the hostages, as this is one of the most pressing domestic issues or criticisms of the Israeli government. We would also expect Israeli politicians who have big of an influence on the domestic survival of the government, to have an influence in the starvation policy.

For the last explanation, that the starvation policy is ideologically motivated, most importantly we would expect some type of ideology to be mentioned by leaders in their justification of the starvation policy. This could present itself as a persistent discourse that erases the distinction between civilians and militants, that prioritizes collective punishment, that dehumanizes the Gazan population, or any mentions of Zionist ideas regarding Gaza. As a causal effect, we would expect the blockade to persist despite international condemnation,

because this would prove that international norms do not outweigh the wish to pursue the starvation policy, and despite limited military utility, as this would prove the starvation policy persisting despite not being a military necessity. Table 1 outlines the different implications that we could expect to observe to prove the different presented explanations. Each observable implication has a different consequence for each explanation, and therefore has a different evidentiary value.

Table 1. Observable implications

<i>Implications</i>	<i>Conditions under which each explanation would predict observation</i>			<i>Evidentiary value if observed</i>	<i>Evidentiary value if not observed</i>
	<i>Strategic logic</i>	<i>Political logic</i>	<i>Ideological logic</i>		
1. The siege or blockade is tightened at the same time and place as combat operations by Hamas occur	Required	Possible, but not required	Irrelevant	High for strategic; moderately for political; irrelevant for ideological	Dispositive against strategic; weakly damaging for political; irrelevant for ideological
2. Framing of the siege as a necessity to pressure Hamas and thereby destroy the organization	Required	Possible, but not required	Irrelevant	High for strategic; low for political; irrelevant for ideological	Dispositive against strategic, weakly damaging for political; irrelevant for ideological
3. Domestic political crises coincide with escalations in restrictions of aid	Irrelevant	Required	Irrelevant	Irrelevant for strategic; high for political; irrelevant for ideological	Dispositive against political; neither supportive nor damaging for political and ideological
4. Framing the siege as a necessity for the return of the hostages	Possible, but not required	Required	Irrelevant	Moderately in favor for strategic, highly important for political; irrelevant for ideological	Weakly damaging against strategic; dispositive against political; irrelevant for ideological
5. The presence of ideological elements within the justifications of restrictions of aid	Irrelevant	Irrelevant	Required	Neither supporting nor damaging for strategic and political, highly supportive for ideological	Neither supporting nor damaging for strategic and political, dispositive against ideological
6. The siege or blockade is continued despite international condemnation	Irrelevant	Possible, but not required	Very likely, but not required	Irrelevant for strategic; neutral favor for political; high for ideological	Irrelevant for strategic, moderately against political, dispositive against ideological
7. The siege or blockade is continued despite limited military utility	Extremely unlikely	Possible, but not required	Very likely, but not required	Dispositive for strategic, neutral for political, high for ideological	Extremely high for strategic, neither supporting nor damaging for political, damaging for ideological

The first implication, is specifically important to the strategic logic. If observed, it would mean there is high evidence for the strategic logic to be proven. More importantly, if it is not observed at all, it would be dispositive for this logic, meaning that there would be a low chance of a causal link between the tightening of the siege and military necessity. For the political logic, this implication has a low evidentiary value. It could show us that the siege is tightened for political purposes, as it could imply domestic pressure because of rises in Hamas combat operations, but it is not necessarily needed. This first implication is irrelevant for the ideological explanation, as that explanation would have very little to do so with the actual actions of Hamas, and more so of the framing by Israeli officials of said actions and the consequential siege.

The second implication is also required for the strategic logic. The pressure on Hamas can be interpreted as a military tactic. Therefore, if the aid restrictions are framed as a military tactic, it would prove a high evidentiary value for the strategic logic. Once again, it would be dispositive for the strategic explanation should this not be observed. For the political logic, the observable implication would provide a low evidentiary value. It could be observed, but it does not provide us with a high level of evidence, as it would point more into the direction of the strategic logic. This second implication would once again be irrelevant for the ideological explanation.

The third implication is required to prove the political logic. This not only implies that the evidentiary value should this be observed is very high, more importantly it means that should it not be observed, it would be dispositive for the political logic, meaning there would be a low causal mechanism between political motivations and the tightening of the siege. For the strategic and ideological logic, this observable implication is irrelevant, meaning the evidentiary value would be neither supportive nor damaging for each explanation.

The fourth implication is also required to prove the political logic. As stated above, the return of the hostages is one of the most pressing domestic issues within Israeli society, and a framing of a connection between the starvation policy and the return of the hostages would have a very high evidentiary value for the political logic. For the strategic explanation, this framing could be possible to provide evidence, but only if the return of the hostages is framed within the context of it being a military necessity, not a political asset. Lastly, for the ideological explanation, this implication would be irrelevant, as the framing of the siege in such way lacks ideological components which are essential for proving this explanation.

The fifth implication is required to prove the ideological explanation. Moreover, should there be no presence of ideological elements within such justification for deprivation of aid or starvation crimes, it would be dispositive for the ideological explanation. In this analysis specifically, it would mean that there is not enough evidence to make a proper argument for the ideological explanation, as this is the only implication truly required to prove this. For both the strategic and political logic, the presence of ideological elements is irrelevant and therefore has no evidentiary value.

The sixth implication is very likely to be observed within the ideological logic, as it implies ideology to be prioritized over international pressure and norms. However, it is not required for the ideological explanation, as ignoring international pressure could also be because of other convictions than ideological ones. For the strategic logic, this implication is irrelevant and therefore has no evidentiary value, because international condemnation does not have a connection to military necessity, and would therefore not be part of the consideration. For the political logic, it would be possible to observe the siege to be continued despite international condemnation, but only if doing so would be domestically beneficial for Israeli officials. Therefore, the evidentiary value would neither be supporting nor damaging the political logic, it would depend on the specific situation.

The final implication, the siege or blockade is continued despite limited military utility, is once again very likely to be observed within the ideological logic, for the same reason as stated above. For the strategic logic, this implication would be very unlikely to observe and could even be dispositive for the argument, as it would break the causal mechanism between the starvation policy and military necessity. The evidentiary value for this implication should it not be observed, is therefore extremely high for the strategic logic. For the political logic, this implication is once again possible, but certainly not required and would have neither supporting nor damaging evidentiary value for the political logic.

As becomes clear when comparing these observable implications is that these three mechanisms might overlap, therefore it could be difficult to prove which explanation best fits. This is a limitation that is quite common with process tracing: the problem of different causal mechanisms producing similar observable outcomes. However, the aim of this research is not to claim absolute causal certainty and to claim that one such explanation for indiscriminate violence fits the Israeli case of a starvation policy. It is more so focused on

looking for comparative plausibility and finding an explanation that most fits the case, so this does not necessarily have to be considered a limitation (Bennet & Checkel, 2014).

Observable implications that mostly overlap are those about the framing of the reason why aid is restricted. Table 1 shows that the ideological explanation for the question is relatively harder to prove, than the other two explanations. Additionally, the political logic seems to have a higher probability of fitting the question than the other two. This can have multiple reasons. Firstly, to gain domestic legitimacy, the war in general would have to be justified to the public. The specific way in which the aid restrictions are framed, is not necessarily important when achieving that goal. Furthermore, ideological justifications might be harder to prove as it is less observable, and there may be missing data. This does not necessarily mean that the ideological factors are not important for the leaders making decisions regarding aid restrictions, but that they are less public about these convictions. In this case, the missing data would then be viewed from the perspective that the actor, in this case the Israeli government, may have an incentive to omit evidence that would prove the ideological explanation to be true. This line of reasoning could still provide us with enough justifications for the missing data and could therefore be enough of a base to make a meaningful conclusion about the reasoning behind the starvation policy (Gonzalez-Ocantos, & LaPorte, 2021)

Due to a limited amount of space, the analysed time frame is limited to the first year of the war. This can be considered a limitation, but does not have to be, as making an in depth analysis of the first year of the war has proven to show enough of a pattern in the Israeli policy-making towards starvation. The time frame will be from the initial blockade imposed after the October 7th attacks all the way to the tightening of the siege in the North of Gaza on October 6th, 2024. Within this time frame, a couple of moments of escalation or de-escalation were analysed during which the starvation policy by the Israeli government was implemented. This starvation policy, as mentioned earlier, is not simply confined to aid restrictions, but also concerns itself with direct military attacks worsening the humanitarian situation in Gaza, and thereby enforcing the level of starvation present in the area.

Other limitations for this project can be that it revolves around a single-case study, and therefore the conclusion will have limited generalizability. The Israel-Palestine case, could be considered an exceptional conflict and would therefore not be applicable to other cases of the use of a starvation policy. Though this is a fair criticism, this research is not

necessarily aimed at generalizability. More so, it focuses on Israel-Palestine, because the research question only aims to provide insight in this specific case. Furthermore, just because it is an exceptional case, does not mean the patterns arising from the analysis, could provide us with insights on how other regimes could act, or could act as a case that other cases can be compared to.

The final two limitations have to do with data collection and possible source bias. Firstly, the case presented does not necessarily have clear data access. Specifically concerning the establishment of intent behind the starvation policy, there is a limited access to internal decision-making. This is dealt with the same way we would generally deal with missing data within process-tracing research designs. The missing data would then be viewed from the perspective that the actor, in this case the Israeli government, may have an incentive to omit evidence that would prove an explanation to be true. This line of reasoning could still provide us with enough justifications for the missing data and could therefore be enough of a base to make a meaningful conclusion about the intent of the starvation policy.

Lastly, a limitation that also has to do with data, is that of possible source bias and the politicization of evidence. To analyze the framing of the starvation policy, an Amnesty International report was used to provide comments made by Israeli officials on the war and the deprivation of aid. These statements were pre-translated from Hebrew. The danger of using this second-hand data is that it is already too interpreted when using, and that the analysis made for this research is influenced by the conclusions made by the third party using the same data. Though this is important to keep in mind, conclusions drawn from these statements were carefully made, and should be an issue for the overall analysis. Furthermore, it is important to realize that doing research within conflict studies, always provides us with imperfect data, which does not mean we cannot use it and make conclusions about it, but just that it should be considered carefully.

ANALYSIS

On the 7th of October in 2023, Hamas launched “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood” (UNRWA, 2023a). Thousands of rockets were launched towards Israel (OCHA, 2023a) providing cover to Hamas militants, who then broke through Israeli military posts and the security fence around Gaza. Hamas militants invaded urban areas in Southern Israel and killed or kidnapped Israelis, many of whom were civilians, including children and elderly people (International Crisis Group, 2023). Hamas had taken 251 hostages during the attack (BBC, 2025). As a response, Israeli Forces launched “Operation Iron Sword” striking several targets in the Gaza Strip. On the first day, the Ministry of Health in Gaza reported that 198 Palestinians had been killed and 1,610 others had been injured (OCHA, 2023a).

On the evening of the 7th of October, Israeli authorities ceased supplying electricity to the Gaza Strip, reducing the hours of electricity to 3-4 per day. On the 8th of October, Israeli authorities decided to cut off the water supply to Gaza through the three connection points, which resulted in a severe shortage of already scarce drinkable water (OCHA, 2023b). During the first two days of the violence, the Rafah crossing in Southern Gaza was still open so some truckloads of humanitarian aid still entered the Strip. However, on October 9th, Israel announced a “total blockade” (Al Jazeera, 2025) on the Gaza Strip. This entailed a total halting of food, fuel, electricity and water into the Gaza Strip, closing the truck crossing with Gaza, and thereby obstructing the delivery of relief supplies to the enclave’s 2,2 million people (OCHA, 2023b; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Humanitarian organizations, which had used Gaza City as their hub for years, were also subjected to evacuation orders, and were forced to leave behind warehouse supplies, equipment and vehicles, and to re-establish a humanitarian infrastructure from scratch in Rafah (Amnesty International, 2024a). Water supplies could not be replenished and fuel could not be brought in, so the water suppliers that were still active, could no longer deliver water through Gaza. The electricity supply from Israel to Gaza that was needed to operate water pumps, desalination plants and sanitation infrastructure within Gaza, was cut off (Human Rights Watch, 2024a).

On the 11th of October, Gaza’s sole power plant ran out of fuel and was forced to stop functioning, meaning that Gaza underwent a full electricity blackout, which brought essential health, water and sanitation services to the brink of collapse, and exacerbated food insecurity (OCHA, 2023d). Besides the lack of electricity, since the start of the hostilities, at this point

seven significant water and sewage facilities serving over 1,100,000 people were hit by airstrikes. The sewage and solid waste posed a health hazard (OCHA, 2023d). These decisions to lay a siege on Gaza and to attack water and electricity supplies, fall in line with the first implication: Hamas's military actions sparked an Israeli response.

Immediately, Israeli officials started using all forms of framing to justify the war and the siege on Gaza. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu previously vowed to reduce parts of Gaza to rubble (International Crisis Group, 2023b). Israeli leaders often suggested that civilians bear responsibility for Hamas' actions (International Crisis Group, 2023b), with Israel's UN ambassador, Gilad Erdan stating "I really feel sorry for the suffering of the people of Gaza, but we should all remember they elected Hamas eighteen years ago" (The Lead CNN, 2023). Israeli President Isaac Herzog went so far as to imply that no Palestinian in Gaza is innocent, stating that "they could have risen up against Hamas" (International Crisis Group, 2023b). These statements fall in line with the ideological explanation.

Yoav Gallant, the Israeli Defence Minister, indicated that electricity, fuel and water supply to Gaza will not be restored until the Israeli hostages are released (OCHA, 2023c). Furthermore, Energy Minister Israel Katz ordered that water supplies be cut off: "No electrical switch will be turned on, no water pump will be opened and no fuel truck will enter until the Israeli abductees are returned home" (Times of Israel, 2023) Katz also implied that Israel's decision to ban the entry of fuel was intended to inflict conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of Palestinians in Gaza: "...This is what should be done to a nation of murderers and butchers of children. What was will not be." (Amnesty International, 2024b). Israeli officials have declared that no aid will enter Gaza from Israel, justifying banning fuel shipments, even via Egypt on the grounds that fuel would "enable Hamas to continue its attacks on Israeli citizens" (Human Rights Watch, 2023), which falls in line with the strategic explanation.

Following the October 7th attacks, Israeli officials used dehumanizing language, describing the Palestinian population as "human animals" (Amnesty International, 2024b) and "human beasts" (COGAT, 2023). Prime Minister Netanyahu portrayed the Israeli military offensive on Gaza as an apocalyptic fight against an "uncivilized world", stating that "We have to win for the sake of the civilized world" on November 13, 2023 (Amnesty International, 2024b) He furthermore referred to Gaza as a "wicked city" and to the military campaign on Gaza as a struggle between "humanity and the law of the jungle" (Israeli

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023) This use of dehumanizing language, falls into the pattern of ideological language. To emphasize this, Israeli official often times used rhetoric comparing the Palestinian population to Nazi's, further implementing a Zionist rhetoric in the conflict. For example, in October 2023, Ben-Gvir stated "As long as hundreds of women, children, old people and the other abductees are held by the Nazi entity, no humanitarian aid should be allowed." (Amnesty International, 2024b). This would further indicate an ideological justification of the restriction of aid. However, this statement was followed up with: "Want 'humanitarian'? Release the hostages." (Amnesty International, 2024b) It becomes clear that different Israeli officials had different views on justifying the war, with some holding a more political stance, and others using it as an opportunity to implement their specific ideology.

The framing of the war seems to fall into the pattern of the way Israel has approached wars in Gaza in the past, reinforcing its deterrence. By "mowing the grass": periodically demonstrating the cost of transgressing red lines and diminishing Hamas's fighting capacity. However, with this Operation, Israel appeared to be aiming at a goal more intrusive into Gaza's society, namely preventing Hamas' regrowth in the Strip and better protect Israel from an attack (International Crisis Group, 2023a). To emphasize this, Netanyahu has described the Operation as Israel's "second war of independence" (Ynet News, 2023). This framing resonated with the feeling of a national crisis and what Israel sees as the absolute necessity of eliminating Hamas and restoring the army's credibility (International Crisis Group, 2023). This is very much in line with the political explanation.

On the 21st of October, Israel allowed a 20 trucks of humanitarian aid carrying food, water and medical supplies to pass through the Rafah crossing (UNRWA, 2023b) compared to the average of 500 truckloads prior to the onset of hostilities. Furthermore, once Israel opened the Rafah crossing, it erected an arbitrary and unnecessarily complex inspection process and sharply restricted the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The humanitarian convoys reaching Gaza still did not include much needed fuel, with the UNRWA expecting to run out of fuel within the next two days on the 23rd of October (UNRWA, 2023b). However, the Israeli army claims that fuel and food shipments were not necessary because Gaza has enough. It claimed that Hamas is "creating the public perception of a fuel shortage", and that negotiations and military pressure would continue until all of the hostages were returned (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Because of the security verification that Israel implemented, on average, it took 20 days for humanitarian trucks to travel from the inspection point at Al Arish to Gaza (Human Rights Watch, 2024b). Oxfam concluded that Israel's inspection process further restricted humanitarian aid through the labelling of some humanitarian items as "dual use", having both military and civilian purpose (Oxfam International, 2024). Not only were some of the items labelled "dual use" not considered as such under the Wassenaar Agreement, the policy seemed to be applied inconsistently, as some days dual goods were allowed in, and denied other days (Chotiner, 2024). When a single item aboard a humanitarian convoy was deemed "dual use" by Israeli authorities, the truck was often forced to exit the queue, reload the truck and re-enter the inspection line (Oxfam International, 2024). Furthermore, once trucks had entered Gaza, the lack of fuel and Israel's refusal to coordinate deconfliction with its military operations, made the distribution of aid even more dangerous (International Crisis Group, 2024b).

At the time of this humanitarian corridor opening, Hamas was still firing rockets and engaging military against Israeli targets, including rocket barrages toward central and southern Israel (Israel Hayom Staff, 2023). This could be observed as going against the first implication. However, because the siege was not exactly lifted, and basically tightened again straight after or did not provide actual humanitarian relief because of the stricter rules around humanitarian aid, it should not be considered dispositive towards the military logic. Hamas was also still holding over 200 people hostage and making public statement about potential releases. At the time, Israel denied or dismissed these statements (IDF, 2023). However in late November 2023, Israel and Hamas did agree upon a temporary ceasefire, brokered by Qatar and Egypt, with involvement of the United States (Al Jazeera, 2023).

On the 22nd of November, 2023, a temporary truce was signed, which went into effect on the 24th. Hamas would release around 50 civilian Israeli hostages, and Israel would release about 150 Palestinian prisoners. The ceasefire would allow humanitarian aid trucks to enter Gaza (Al Jazeera, 2023). Israeli officials framed this change of policy with a clear focus on the hostages by for example stating that it would extend the pause by one extra day to every 10 additional hostages released by Hamas (CBS News, 2023). This falls in line with both the military and political logic. The ceasefire was publicly justified around the improvement of the humanitarian situation, after much international pressure. This goes against implication 6, but should not be taken into account too much, as the international pressure on improving the

humanitarian situation had been present since the start of the war, and did not make the Israeli government give in until almost two months in to the war.

The truce did not last long, as the fighting continued on the 29th of November, and with the start of the fighting, so did the deprivation of aid. The aid that had entered the strip during the truce was proving to be insufficient (International Crisis Group, 2023c) During this time, the Integration Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) estimated that around 85% of the Gazan population (1,9 million people) were displaced into an increasingly smaller geographic area (IPC, 2023). It was estimated that between 24 November and 7 December, so right after the fighting started again, over 90% of the population in the Gaza Strip was estimated to face high levels of acute food insecurity (Phase 3 or above). Among these people, over 40% of the population was in Emergency (Phase 4) and over 15% was in Catastrophe (Level 5, the highest level measured by the IPC). The IPC concluded the cause of this to be the hostilities, including bombardment, ground operations and besiegement of the entire population.

Commodities that were allowed to enter the Strip, were insufficient and only reached a portion of the population in the Rafah area (IPC, 2023). And with the two operational crossings both being in Gaza's South, hardly any aid made it to the North (International Crisis Group, 2024a). This was exacerbated because of the active fighting or partial besiegement in that area, which is in line with the first implication. The IPC concluded that the escalation of hostilities caused widespread damage to food production, including farmland and infrastructure. Furthermore, the economic collapse and the loss of agricultural, livestock and fishing production, and ongoing restrictions on commercial traffic exacerbated the dire situation (IPC, 2023).

Israeli response to this report does not fall in line with any of the proposed implications. Instead of providing arguments for the deprivation of aid, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) publicly denied that Gaza was facing famine or food shortages. They argued that the report was unreliable and flawed, accusing the IPC of using biased or incomplete data, depending on sources associated with Hamas or ignoring information provided by Israel (The Times of Israel, 2024). Officials further highlighted that it provided large volumes of humanitarian aid since the start of the war, and that this supply should have mitigated the crisis. They firmly

denied that there was a deliberate starvation policy, and that any deprivation of aid had been primarily due to security concerns and logistical challenges (The Times of Israel, 2024)

In early December 2023, the deputy mayor of Jerusalem used an invented term in Hebrew to refer to Palestinian detainees calling them “Nazi rapists” who should be “buried alive” (Middle East Eye, 2023) a statement very much in line with the ideological explanation. What this period shows us, is that even though towards the international community, Israel claimed to ease up on their starvation policy, the statements were hardly ever implemented into policy actually improving the humanitarian situation on the ground. It showed that causally, the Israeli government only intended to provide more aid, once it achieved something in return, which is in line with the military and political logic. Regarding the justifications of the deprivation of aid and the starvation policy, some implications proving all explanations were present, but most importantly and interestingly, the starvation policy was denied.

On January 26, in its ruling on a genocide case brought forth by South Africa, earlier that month, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Israel to “take immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance to address the adverse conditions of life faced by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip” However, in the month after the order was issued, the average number of aid trucks entering Gaza had decreased by 30% (Gordon, 2024).

Israeli response to the court ruling was in line with their response to the IPC report. The Israeli government continued the pattern of denying and rejecting the ruling’s framing. Netanyahu called the charges “false and outrageous” and reiterated Israel’s right to defend itself against Hamas (Siddique et al., 2024; Reuters, 2024a). Other Israeli officials portrayed the ICJ process as biased or politicized and accused the Court of ignoring the context of the war Some senior officials even described the cases and ruling in allegations of antisemitic bias (McKernan, 2024). The latter framing falling in line with the Zionist ideology, though not in the justification of the aid. However, Israel did also emphasize that its military campaign was aimed at Hamas militants, and not against the Palestinian population as a whole, and that it was committed to international law (Reuters, 2024a). The government’s rejection of the ruling resonated with many Israelis that views international criticism on the ruling as hostile or biased (McKernan, 2024). Therefore, the rejection of the Court’s order falls in line with the political logic, as it domestically appeases.

As stated above, the Israeli government did not comply with the measures the ICJ issued and continued its starvation policy. At the time, Hamas fighters remained active in the South particularly Khan Yunis and surrounding areas, but also maintained a presence in central Gaza as well (ACLEED, 2023). Because of Israeli operations earlier in the conflict, Hamas military structures in Northern Gaza were significantly degraded, though not entirely eradicated (ACLEED, 2023). Militarily then, one could assume that the South would be attacked by the starvation policy most harshly, but this proved not to be the case, disproving the military explanation.

In a report in February of 2024, the latest evidence by the IPC found that famine was imminent in the Northern parts of the Gaza Strip and projected to occur any time between mid-March and May 2024. The reason for this is the near-complete lack of access to the North of Gaza for humanitarian organizations and commercial trucks. The escalation of hostilities caused widespread damage to assets and infrastructure indispensable to survival (IPC, 2024). In March and April, the amount of food deliveries and nutrition services provided to North Gaza increased, this appeared to temporarily alleviate conditions (IPC, 2024). This has to do with the sixth implication, and shows that international condemnation indeed did have an impact on Israel's starvation policy. However, though the amount of food deliveries in March and April might have increased, on March 19th, the Israeli authorities continued to block electricity to Gaza. Israel also continued to block the entry of fuel to Gaza (Human Rights Watch, 2024b). So even though international pressure caused some more aid to enter the Strip, the distribution of said aid was still nearly impossible, .

The starvation policy entailed more than just the deprivation of aid, but also included directed attacks at hospitals, aid workers, and civilians looking for food. In February 2024, Israel killed at least 112 Palestinians and wounded more than 750 when it opened fire on Palestinians waiting for food aid southwest of Gaza City. The attack was quickly called the "flour massacre" (Al Jazeera, 2025c). The Israeli military carried out numerous similar attacks on life-saving aid convoys, often saying that "terrorists" were being targeted, but without providing actual evidence (Amnesty International, 2024b). Militarily, assuming that Hamas was most active in South Gaza at the time, the event would fall in line with the first implication. Justifications by the Israeli military, further provides evidence for the second implication, as the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) said the strikes were aimed at "terror targets" and that these targets were embedded within civilian areas, which it then described as a consequence of Hamas intentionally operating among the population (Foundation for

Defence of Democracies, 2024). The main public framing by Israeli officials, was that the civilian deaths were unintended and a “tragic mistake” (Cordall et al., 2024), further iterating the military and political logic.

In March 2024, the ICJ ordered for further measures, ordering Israel to ensure the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance (Human Rights Watch, 2024). A few days after this second set of provisional measures, six aid workers were killed (Amnesty International, 2024). Israeli drone strikes targeted an aid convoy with the World Central Kitchen, killing six international aid workers and a Palestinian driver. Netanyahu called the deaths an unintended result of military operations, reiterating that civilian harm can occur during active combat. Military and government statements characterized the killing of the aid workers as a tragic error, and not an international targeting of humanitarian aid workers (BBC News, 2024a; Reuters, 2024b). Furthermore, the IDF actually dismissed two officers and formally reprimanded senior commanders (Armstrong, 2025). In response, World Central Kitchen and other NGO’s paused or scaled back Gaza operations after the strike due to safety concerns (The Guardian, 2024a; Wall Street Journal, 2024). This suspension was significant for the humanitarian aid entering Gaza, as WCK had been providing much. Following this attack and the international outrage that occurred, to appease to the international community, in April 2024, Israel committed to opening a crossing into the North of Gaza, and in May 2024, opened both the Eastern and Western crossings in the North of Gaza. However, since the attack caused many humanitarian organizations to pause or withdraw, food distribution capacity was still significantly reduced (Amnesty International, 2024b)

Then, on the 6th of May in 2024, Israel launched its ground operation in Rafah, despite widespread international pressure not to do so (BBC News, 2024b; Reuters, 2024c), strengthening the sixth implication. Hereby Israel deliberately imperilled the humanitarian response again and caused another wave of mass displacement without ensuring the basic necessities of life for those displaced (Amnesty International, 2024b). In the southern governorates, the situation deteriorated following renewed hostilities in early May. Humanitarian access to the two million people in the south has notably reduced with the closure of the Rafah border crossing and disruptions to the Karem Shalom crossing (IPC, 2024). The Rafah offensive, combined with hostilities in the northern governorates resulted in very limited humanitarian access to and within the Gaza Strip (IPC, 2024).

The offensive on Rafah was launched a week after Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich, a member of Israel's security cabinet, explicitly called for the city's destruction by referring to a well-known Biblical story of absolute vengeance in which an entire nation, the people of Amalek, is ordered to be destroyed: "There are no jobs half done. Rafah, Deir al-Balah, Nuseirat, destruction! Blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven" (Amnesty International, 2024b), a reference that was made earlier in the first week of the attack on Gaza. Furthermore, Minister of Finance Smotrich and Minister of National Security Ben-Gvir, who also made some of the most explicit calls for the destruction of Palestinians in Gaza, threatened to quit the government coalition if Prime Minister Netanyahu abandoned plans to attack Rafah (The Guardian, 2024b). Though these statements were not necessarily in regards to the starvation policy, the invasion of Rafah was going to exacerbate the humanitarian situation, and the Israeli government was aware of this. Furthermore, these statements exceed simply a military objective, as this is not just insinuating destroying Hamas, but the entire population, which falls more so in line with the ideological logic. Though there were some Israeli officials, such as Finance Minister Smotrich and Minister of National Security Ben Gvir, which did not have that big of an impact on the policy towards the military offensive in Gaza, Netanyahu did hugely depended on their political support to remain in power before and during the offensive on Gaza (Amnesty International, 2024). Knowing that they called for the Rafah offensive, whilst technically having little to do with war policy, further proves the political explanation.

On May 24, the International Criminal Justice ordered Israel to "maintain open the Rafah crossing for unhindered provision at scale of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance" (International Court of Justice, 2024). Israeli authorities once again rejected "any allegations according to which Israel is purposefully starving the civilian population in Gaza" (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024) They blamed the widespread hunger and disease in Gaza on Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups, and on humanitarian organizations, alleging they were incapable of distributing the aid Israel allowed into Gaza (Amnesty International, 2024b). And though humanitarian organizations had been less effective in aid distribution, this was mostly due to a lack of safety guarantees by the Israeli military and attacks by Israel on Gaza's institutions, including the police (Human Rights Watch, 2024b). Additionally, Israeli authorities maintained that no limits were placed on the amount of aid that could enter Gaza, and they did not limit the entrance of food. They also maintained that the restrictions imposed on fuel were necessary to prevent

Hamas from diverting it, including to power its rockets (Amnesty International, 2024), making the justification more in line with the military logic. It was not until the 2025 ceasefire that the crossing was opened properly (Al Jazeera, 2025a).

On October 6th 2024, the Israeli military commenced a massive siege on northern Gaza, designating the entire area a combat zone and issuing forced evacuation orders to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. The siege on the north also lasted until a ceasefire with Hamas came into effect on January 19, 2025 (BBC News, 2024c; Reuters, 2025). Aid deliveries to the North were suspended, deepening the humanitarian catastrophe in the area (International Crisis Group, 2024b). A week before this incursion, Israel rolled out a combination of measures virtually halting the entry of food, water, fuel or medical supplies into the North by imposing new customs requirements that in effect cut off aid imports from Jordan (International Crisis Group, 2024b). With the Israeli army ordering the area's health care facilities to close and the army dividing the North into parcels and blocking routes, particularly from the Jabalya refugee camp, it prospects that the operation might escalate into an offensive aimed at emptying the North of its inhabitants and starving Hamas and whoever remained into submission (International Crisis Group, 2024b).

Israeli statements suggested that Hamas was regrouping in the North, especially in refugee camps. The siege, in this case, was framed as necessary to prevent a resurgence of attacks (Global Conflict Tracker, 2025). Though Hamas did remain active in the region, the UN characterized much of the northern population as trapped civilians, not organized combatants (OCHA, 2024). The justification in this sense then aligns with the military logic, but the causality does not work. This strategy Israel was perpetrating here seems to comply with the "generals plan" by Giora Eiland, earlier mentioned and stated at the beginning of the war. Though this plan was not approved by the government, and Netanyahu has insisted that it does not envision permanently occupying Gaza, the prime minister has himself spoken favourably about the plan in government meetings (Krever & Yosef, 2024), falling in line with the ideological logic. Furthermore, one must not underestimate the symbolic value of the date, October 6th, to choose to tighten the siege and exacerbate Palestinian suffering, which could provide support for the political and ideological explanation.

Relevant throughout all these escalations, has been that the war has granted Netanyahu a reprieve from a corruption trial and Israel's biggest-ever protests, denouncing his government's judicial overhaul plan, that were running weekly for most of a year until 7

October. The government has attempted to regain some legitimacy by bringing in former defence minister Benny Gantz, a retired army general, which has given the cabinet some domestic legitimacy and military expertise, but it has not changed the government's far right complexion (International Crisis Group, 2023a). Continuing the attacks and the siege, at this point of the war, allowed him and his coalition partners, whose poll numbers also have plummeted, to continue pursuing their annexationist agenda in the West Bank (International Crisis Group, 2023a). The war in Gaza seemed to partly act as a shield for Netanyahu, more specifically against his corruption trial. As even though technically the court continued with the trial in December 2023, Netanyahu himself did not testify during the entirety of the first war, with reasoning being that he was preoccupied (Haaretz, 2023). At the same time however, on a longer term, the war has also proven to provide instability, as the domestic pressure to return the hostages became higher and higher as the war went on. Some internal voices even blamed Netanyahu for prioritizing political gain and survival over bringing the hostages home (The Times of Israel, 2024b).

Historically, Hamas has gained popularity among Palestinians when it is seen to be pursuing armed resistance to Israel and this pattern has held in the present war. So though Netanyahu claims that Hamas's destruction will enable the 'deradicalization' of Gaza as one of its military aims, the opposite is likely (International Crisis Group, 2023a). Adding to that, the anger and grievance that has been created through years of occupation and blockade, not to mention the present military campaign, can all but guarantee that both political and violent resistance to Israel will continue (International Crisis Group, 2024a). Therefore, the continuation of the war and the implementation of the starvation policy, which will affect civilians later, would militarily on a longer term, not be effective, and support implication 7.

What becomes clear during the entire first year of the war, is that Israel does not just use the siege within its starvation policy, Israel has damaged and destroyed resources vital for the realization of human rights, including hospitals, schools, water and energy infrastructure, bakeries, and agricultural land, and has permitted only limited humanitarian access, which remains utterly insufficient to meet the essential needs of the population. As a result, Gaza is experiencing a humanitarian crisis, and the Israeli government does not seem concerned with improving the living conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2024a). The Israeli government responds verbally to calls about the humanitarian situation, but lacks in its implementation of actual policy changes toward the aid restrictions. Apart from that, the Israeli government seemed mostly concerned with justifying the aid restrictions in terms of military necessity

right after the October 7th attacks. The tactic after, has simply been to deny the existence of restrictions of aid, the existence of famine, and to blame international organizations while further implementing another part of the starvation policy, namely destroying the conditions of living.

Though the statements made about the starvation policy do not involve the observable implications related to the explanations for indiscriminate violence, the statements about denial do. Only they do not coincide with a single explanation, but more so prove to be a mixture of all three. This however, does not provide us with proof for the explanations given in this thesis, as this did not foresee the act of denying. Though there are not that many statements made about the justifications of the starvation policy, it is clear from the data that the Israeli government knows the consequences of its implemented policies. Furthermore, statements from officials about the war itself, have shown clear intent of destruction, beyond military necessity. So though one could not conclude that the specific starvation policy was implemented because of the will to politically survive or out of ideological reasoning, it could be stated that the war efforts are, and furthermore that the starvation policy is implemented despite the awareness about the exacerbating humanitarian situation.

Although the starvation policy perpetrated by Israel was in line with the military objectives of the war at first, as the war goes on, this explanation makes less and less sense. The siege and starvation crimes are not necessarily limited to where Hamas is mostly based, and most importantly, the starvation policy proves ineffective, as Hamas was not eradicated. Looking at table 1, it seems the political explanation for indiscriminate violence is most fitting. The starvation policy by the Israeli government was perpetrated because of domestic political pressure and with the aim for the Netanyahu government to politically survive. However, interestingly the political figures that then support this, and are needed for the government to politically survive, are also the ones that have the most ideological incentive within the war because of their use of ideological justifications. The fact that the starvation policy was denied, could also be connected to ideology, as officials could not want to admit the reasoning for the implementation of the starvation policy. However, this specific research provided us with too little evidence of that.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to answer the question of how to explain Israel's use of indiscriminate violence, specifically in the form of a starvation policy, including the deprivation of humanitarian aid, in Gaza during the first year of the Israeli attack on Gaza. It did so by focusing on three explanations for indiscriminate violence, strategic, political and ideological, looking for causal mechanisms and the framing of justifications for such a starvation policy. Altogether, the Israeli government seems have used starvation as a push and pull war technique. The analysis showed that even though Israeli sometimes abided to international pressure, it only changed their starvation policy within a short-term perspective to appease to the international outrage. Israel restricted aid, easing up when famine alerts appeared, and then tightening again as attention faded (International Crisis Group, 2025b). When the UN and others have warned of imminent famine, as they did in December of 2023 and March of 2024 (IPC 2023; IPC 2024), Israel firstly denies the allegations, then briefly relaxed some controls to increase the flow of supplies, only to tighten them again after international attention faded.

The Israeli case proves to be explanatory for the political explanation of indiscriminate violence, as this explanation mostly fits the causal mechanisms present in the first year of the Israeli attack on Gaza. It was political pressure, not military necessity, though the two sometimes furthered the same goal, that was most present in the decision of perpetrating the starvation policy. The political element was also present within the justifications of said policy, however not prominently, as the starvation policy was quick to be actively denied by Israeli officials. The theoretical framework presented did not account for the justifications of the starvation policy to be missing, which can be considered a limitation of the study. However, the very fact that the starvation policy was denied, instead of defended, does provide us with interesting revelations.

As this research only scopes the first year of the war, it would be interesting for future research to look into whether this pattern of political pressure and denial of the starvation policy was also present in later stages of the war. Specifically with the International Criminal Court arrest warrants occurring in November 2024, and Netanyahu's corruption trial continuing in December 2024 (United Nations, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). Furthermore, assuming that international norms around starvation may have caused Israel to deny these allegations, it would be interesting to research how Israel uses or abuses these international norms within their justifications of their starvation policy. The denial of the starvation policy

further provided us with possible implications about ideological motivation. It would be interesting to undertake a critical discourse analysis into how ideology could present itself within the Israeli government, and whether this denial could be part of this.

Societally, what this research implies, is that international pressure can work, even on states who seem reluctant to oblige to this pressure. When the international community was paying attention, Israel eased up the tensions on the humanitarian situation. It was not until the community looked away again, that it continued its starvation policy. Though the aim of this research was to build onto the explanations of indiscriminate violence, interestingly it actually provided more insight into the weight that a starvation policy, such as the Israeli government is perpetrating, has internationally. Even a state as Israel, that has no problem using indiscriminate violence, is reluctant in admitting their use of starvation as a policy.

As a whole, the Israeli attack on Gaza, and the use of starvation as a war method portrays a dark picture of the state of humanitarian aid and violence in the twenty first century. At the time of writing, over two years after the war initially started, the entire Palestinian population is still in danger. Whether that be from Israeli attacks ongoing despite the ceasefire, the still lack of humanitarian aid entering the Strip, or the brutal living conditions that civilians are living in, the consequences of the war and the starvation policy perpetrated by Israel, are felt heavily in the entire area (Amnesty International, 2025; PBS News, 2025).

By slightly lifting the siege and improving the humanitarian situation after accusations of using starvation and the deprivation of aid as a war method, even though they denied the accusations, the Israeli government has proven to be aware of the effects of their starvation policy, whether proven to be intended or not. And though evidence of intention is important in establishing accusations of genocide, from a human rights perspective, it is not. The mere causal relation between the easing of Israel's starvation policy, and the improvement of the humanitarian situation in Gaza, is enough to argue that the Israeli government knew their influence on the humanitarian situation, but was not concerned by the depth of the civilian suffering. However, the possible influence of international pressure being effective in cases, even such as those like Israel, can provide us with a sense of hope and determination. As a society, we must continue to put pressure onto states like Israel during humanitarian disasters caused by violence, such as unfolded in the Gaza Strip, to prevent such suffering from happening again.

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