## RESEARCH NOTES AND STATISTICS

## The Destruction of Agriculture and Mass Starvation in Palestine

Arun Kumar\*

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It is now more than 13 months since Israel began its brutal aggression on Palestine. The aggression began after the attack of Hamas on October 7, 2023. Although Israel launched its offensive with the declared objective of eliminating Hamas, its present purposes have shifted far beyond that declared objective. History has proved time and again that organisations like Hamas that enjoy wide support among the people – who identify the organisation with the cause of the liberation of the homeland – cannot easily be obliterated.

As of October 31, 2024 in Gaza, 43,163 people had been killed, 101,510 wounded, and 10,000 declared missing (*The Palestine Chronicle* 2024). *The Lancet* (August, 2024) estimates the number of deaths to be far higher, at least 186,000 persons, or nearly 8 per cent of the population of Gaza. It arrived at these numbers by including all direct and indirect deaths caused by the aggression, that is, including starvation deaths, deaths caused by the unavailability of medicines, and other such reasons (Khatib, Salim, and Yusuf 2024). Nearly 1,000 Palestinians were killed by Israeli armed forces and settlers in the West Bank, and more than 3,000 were declared dead in Lebanon because of Israeli attacks. UNICEF states that an average of three children have been killed every day in Lebanon, further noting the "chilling similarities" these attacks share with what is happening in Lebanon and Gaza. Media reports quote the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health stating that among the 3,452 people killed since Israel's attack, 231 were children and out of the 14,664 people wounded, 1,330 were children (Elder 2024).

Israeli aggression has also spread to many regions in West Asia. It has carried out attacks on selected targets in Iran, and bombed Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq

\* International Department, Communist Party of India (Marxist)

indiscriminately (AJLabs 2024; People's Democracy 2024). The human toll directly caused by the bombings and killings is mounting with every passing day.

Apart from the human loss, Israel's attack has led to the displacement of about 90 per cent of the 2.3 million population of Gaza, most of them having been displaced many times. According to the United Nations (UN), the war has damaged or destroyed over 92 per cent of Gaza's main roads and more than 84 per cent of its health facilities. It estimates that nearly 70 per cent of Gaza's water and sanitation plants have been destroyed or damaged. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA 2023) reports that 87 per cent of schools in Gaza have been hit by munitions or damaged since the beginning of the conflict. According to the Health Cluster (2024), between October 7, 2023 and September 19, 2024, every hospital in Gaza had been affected by Israeli attacks, and no hospital remained fully functional. As of September 11, 2024, 19 out of 36 hospitals were out of service and the remaining 17 hospitals were only partially functional. There were 492 attacks on healthcare facilities in Gaza (UN Relief and Works Agency 2024).

Another important facet of these attacks, though often not highlighted, is the destruction of livelihoods in Gaza and the West Bank. Data from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS 2023) estimated that the losses of the agricultural sector in Gaza, in the background of the present aggression, were approximately USD 2 million per day. Data show that there is a deliberate targeting of agricultural areas in northern Gaza, which constitutes a third of the area cultivated with field crops, vegetables, and trees in Gaza.

Agriculture contributes 7.1 per cent of the GDP of Palestine, and, most importantly, it helps in achieving food security. A total of 46 per cent of Palestinians' food needs are met from domestic agricultural production, while the remaining 54 per cent are met by imports (PCBS 2023). Israel has shut down all routes to import food and is deliberately denying access even to food aid, thus restricting food supplies reaching people. According to the UN,

During the month of September (2024), the World Food Programme was only able to deliver 41 per cent of its planned food commodities (11,334 metric tonnes delivered out of 27,904 metric tonnes planned), down from 58 per cent in August (13,964 metric tonnes delivered out of 23,828 metric tonnes planned) (Davison *et al.* 2024).

A study commissioned by the Palestinian Farmers' Union (2023) shows that, prior to October 2023, there was complete self-sufficiency in Palestine as a whole in vegetables, eggs, and olive oil, while the self-sufficiency rate in many dairy products was about 87 per cent. A study based on the examination of satellite images found that 70 per cent of greenhouses, on which Palestinians depend for their vegetable production, had been destroyed by Israeli attacks, and that 70 per cent of tree crops had either been destroyed or damaged (Khalidi and Rafeedie 2024).

While the foregoing data give us a picture of recent destruction, we must delve into a little bit of history to understand the true brutality of Israeli aggression in Palestine.

Palestine is a Mediterranean country that has geographical and climatic variations that determine its cropping pattern. The Jordan Valley is the vegetable basket of the West Bank, where the villages have irrigated agriculture (Qassis 2024). Coastal plains are home to over 50 per cent of national olive oil production. Agriculture in the desert fringe includes grape cultivation and herding activity. The inland areas of Gaza grow rain-fed crops, and its coastal regions grow fruit and vegetables.

The first war that Israel launched against Palestine was in 1948. Gaza was then a part of South Palestine, and did not exist as a separate entity. After the armistice of 1949, Gaza became a "strip," its area reduced from 28,009 square kilometres to a mere 365 square kilometres. The war destroyed the agrarian life of Southern Palestine and Gaza was cut off from most of the agricultural land to which it had access (Kohlbry 2024).

In 1981, Israel passed a law that stated that any land that remained uncultivated for three years would be declared state land (International Crisis Group 2024). In reality, such land had mostly belonged to Palestinians who were forced to leave their homeland and were never allowed to return. As a result, the land remained uncultivated. This land was "legally" snatched away from Palestinians and handed over to Israeli settlers. Between 1981 and 2018, Israel declared over 1.4 million dunams (140,000 hectares) of land in the West Bank – or about a quarter of the entire territory – as "state land" and allocated it to Israeli settlements. Repeated wars, attacks, and occupation depleted Palestinian territories, so much so that today, only 12 per cent of the original Palestinian territories remain to be called Palestine. Since the beginning of 2024, Israel has declared state ownership of 23,700 dunams (almost 6,000 acres) of West Bank land, more than in any previous calendar year. On June 25, 2024 alone, Israel designated over 3,000 acres in the Jordan Valley as state land, the single largest seizure of occupied land in 30 years (International Crisis Group 2024).

A major part of Palestine remains in what is today called the West Bank. The West Bank was divided into different lines of control after the 1994 Oslo Peace Process – Area A being under Palestinian administrative and security control, Area B under Palestinian administrative and Israeli security control, and Area C under Israeli administrative and security control. These were supposed to be temporary divisions, to last until a permanent and lasting peace was found. But as permanent peace did not materialise, they became, in a way, permanent divisions. In these divisions, most of the cities fell in Area A, while most of the agricultural land is in Area C, which is 60 per cent of the entire West Bank.

The Oslo Peace Accords also called for the creation of a barrier, as well as a 50-meterwide buffer zone between Israel and the Gaza Strip. The Israeli military expanded it during the Second Intifada (2000). The extent of the buffer zone today is unclear and shifting: it can be 300–1,000 meters wide, the width being dependent on the interpretation of Israel. Consequently, the buffer zone eats away a significant portion of arable land. According to a UN report, nearly 46 per cent of Gaza's agricultural land is rendered inaccessible or out of production because of this buffer zone. The resultant loss to Palestine in the years between 2000 and 2014 was estimated to be USD 50 million annually (Khalidi and Rafeedie 2024).

Since 1967, Israel has almost completely controlled Palestinian water resources and denied Palestinians access to their rightful share of water. Israel allocates approximately 89 per cent of available shared water resources to itself, leaving the Palestinian people with less than 11 per cent. As a result, each Palestinian residing in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) (which comprises the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza) receives 60 litres per day for domestic use, with many communities receiving as little as 10 litres per day. In contrast, each Israeli receives 280 litres per day (UNOCHA 2024a). Almost 40 per cent of the Palestinian population living in Gaza does not have access to safe drinking water. Around 60 per cent of the diseases in the Gaza Strip are a result of poor water quality.

Olive cultivation constitutes an important part of Palestinian agriculture. Across the Palestinian territories, olive trees made up 85 per cent of fruit trees and took up 54 per cent of the arable land in the West Bank and Gaza. According to one estimate (UN Development Programme [UNDP] *et al.* 2008), there were nearly 10 million fruit bearing olive trees in Palestine. Olives contributed to the livelihood of 80,000–100,000 Palestinian families; the value of olive production accounted for 4.6 per cent of the GDP (The World Bank Group 2018).

There is also a political reason behind the increase in olive cultivation in Palestine. In the 1970s and 1980s, millions of olive trees were planted by the Palestinian youth as part of volunteer drives. The reason was that any land that was found unused was occupied by Israel. In order to protect their land from occupation and to earn a livelihood, Palestinians began to plant olive trees, whose local varieties are relatively diseaseand drought-resistant and require relatively little care. Once the Israeli state recognised this course of action by Palestinians, it began specifically to target olive cultivation in its attacks on Palestine. Between 1967 and 2023, 1,078,000 olive trees were uprooted by Israeli forces. In 2023 alone, Israel uprooted nearly 19,000 olive trees (Qassis 2024). The 2023 olive harvest was not allowed by Israel, and according to the UNOCHA (2024b), Palestine lost nearly 10,000 tonnes of olives and 1,200 metric tonnes of olive oil production in that single year. The resultant monetary losses were estimated to be USD 10 million.

After October 7, 2023, settlers began to destroy agricultural machinery, irrigation pipes, and water tanks, and to confiscate Palestinian land (in the West Bank). Settlers drove their cattle into Palestinian fields and allowed them to graze in grain fields and olive

groves, destroying trees and crops. Agricultural experts point out that herding large cattle in the Palestinian landscape "leads to overgrazing and results in [the] loss of surface cover, enabling erosion, thus exacerbating desertification in the West Bank" (Qassis 2024).

Together with these measures, Israel banned the shooting of wild boar by Palestinians and instead opened conservation parks for them. As their population rose, wild boar were deliberately released in the farms of Palestinians, particularly in wheat fields and olive groves. While wild boar destroyed wheat and olives, Palestinians were not allowed to shoot the predator animals (Qassis 2024).

In the Gaza region, Israel sprayed herbicides and other chemicals on the land, rendering them useless for cultivation (Madanoğlu 2024). As a result, once lush agricultural lands were turned into parched lands clear of any vegetation. Before 2023, the extent of agricultural land in Gaza was 170 square kilometres, or 47 per cent of its total area (Forensic Architecture 2023). The food produced on this land was crucial for the survival of the people. According to Forensic Architecture (2023), which used remote sensing to measure the scale of agricultural destruction resulting from Israel's attacks on Gaza, 40 per cent of lands used for agricultural production was destroyed. It further reported that between October 2023 and March 2024, one-third of greenhouses were destroyed. In Northern Gaza, where the attacks were much more intense and repeated, nearly 90 per cent of greenhouses were destroyed (Hamit 2024). During this period, Israel converted more than 2,000 agricultural sites and greenhouses in Gaza into military sites. The ground invasion on Gaza has led to the destruction of 50 per cent of Palestinian farmland and orchards.

The Union of Agricultural Work Committees, a Palestinian NGO, has accused Israel of deliberately using chemicals such as white phosphorus on farmlands in Gaza. Chemical contamination has affected the soil and has led to serious disease, including cancers, among farmers. As the chemicals penetrate more than 10 metres deep into the soil, the affected land is rendered uncultivable for more than five years after bombardment (Kohlbry 2024). UN agencies have analysed satellite imagery and stated that "18 per cent of Gaza's arable land has experienced a substantial decline in health and density as a result of the bombardment" (UN Satellite Centre, UN Institute for Training and Research 2023).

Israeli attacks have destroyed more than one-third of the irrigation infrastructure of Gaza (Vos and Soonho 2024). Fishing, another activity that supplements people's incomes and diets, has also been affected badly – 70 per cent of Gaza's fleet of fishing boats has been destroyed (Union of Agricultural Work Committees 2023).

In Gaza, GDP dropped over 80 per cent in the last quarter of 2023, from around USD 670 million to roughly USD 90 million (Anera 2024). The impact of the aggression has been to push Gaza into conditions of extreme starvation. More than 70 per cent of Gaza's

agriculture is destroyed, and as much as 90 per cent of its population is experiencing "high levels of acute food insecurity," as per Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC 2024). Ninety per cent of children under the age of five are experiencing at least one disease as a result of an extremely poor diet (UN Security Council 2024). Starvation is rampant, with Israel denying the entry of even aid trucks (UN Security Council 2024). What can be more inhuman than the bombing by the Israeli state of Palestinian people waiting in queues for the limited amounts of food aid that are available to the people of Gaza? (Al Jazeera 2024; McCready *et al.* 2024)

Following the recent attacks by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and by settlers, access to food is becoming a major issue in the West Bank as well.

Apart from the destruction of agriculture, Israel is also deliberately destroying herding activities. Bedouin communities in Palestine are primarily involved in rearing sheep and goats. Over the last three decades, many springs have dried up. Following changes in land control that followed the land zoning stipulated by the Oslo Accords, Israel used its control over Area C to occupy the lands in which 70-80 per cent of the springs were located (UNOCHA 2012). Having gained control over sources of water, Israel pushed herders away from their traditional lands. Bedouins now have access to 20 litres of water per day, while Israeli settlers use nearly 300 litres per day (Amnesty International 2009). Bedouins were cut off even from electricity, with 40 per cent of their communities denied electrical infrastructure (UNDP 2014). All these measures have pushed 55 per cent of Bedouins from food self-sufficiency to food insecurity (UNDP 2014). Before October 7, 2023, Bedouins witnessed three settler attacks per day (International Crisis Group 2024). After October 7, this has increased to seven attacks per day (UNOCHA 2023). Settler militias armed with sophisticated guns and arms regularly target the Bedouin, with the explicit objective of pushing them away from their lands and denying them access to any production-related activity (International Crisis Group 2024). Settler leaders justify this violence and claim that it is part of what they consider a necessary battle - over agricultural land and, more significantly, for the right to live in the West Bank (International Crisis Group 2024).

On September 15, an important statement by 15 aid organisations gave details of the blocks on food aid to Gaza imposed by the Israeli state. The most important feature of the present situation is that "83 per cent of required food aid does not make it into Gaza, up from 34 per cent in 2023." As a consequence, "people in Gaza have gone from having an average of two meals a day to just one meal every other day" (Norwegian Refugee Council 2024).

Further, about "50,000, children, aged between six and 59 months urgently require treatment for malnutrition before the end of the year" (*ibid*.). In August 2024, alone,

more than 1 million people did not receive any food rations at all in South and Central Gaza (*ibid*.).

The aid agencies specified six ways in which "life-saving aid is systematically obstructed" on a daily basis:

These include the **denial of safety**, with more than 40,000 Palestinians and nearly 300 aid workers killed since last October; the sharp **tightening of a 17-year blockade to a full siege**, which prevents aid from entering Gaza; **delays and denials** which restrict the movement of aid around Gaza; tightly restrictive and unpredictable **control of imports**; the **destruction of public infrastructure** such as schools and hospitals; and the **displacement of civilians and humanitarian workers** (witnessed again in recent displacement orders from the so-called "humanitarian zone" in Deir el-Balah. (*ibid.*)

Far-right leaders in Israel openly call for the war to continue until their objective of establishing "Greater Israel" is realised. Prime Minister Netanyahu displayed a map of the constituent parts of "Greater Israel" in his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2023 (UN 2023). It does not have any space for an independent Palestine or Lebanon, and the Golan Heights in Syria are to be made part of Israel. The United States is not against these expansionist designs of Israel. On the contrary, despite talk of ceasefire, it continues to supply Israel arms and ammunition to continue the aggression, thus intensifying the process of mass starvation and hunger deaths among the Palestinian people.

In the arrest warrants issued on November 2024 by the International Criminal Court for Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, one of the alleged crimes was the "war crime of starvation as a method of warfare" (ICC 2024b).

The application for arrest warrants in the case, filed on May 20, 2024, alleged that Israel had "intentionally and systematically deprived the civilian population in all parts of Gaza of objects indispensable to human survival" (ICC 2024a). The means for doing this was by a "siege over Gaza," by closing border points, and by

arbitrarily restricting the transfer of essential supplies – including food and medicine – through the border crossings after they were reopened. The siege also included cutting off cross-border water pipelines from Israel to Gaza – Gazans' principal source of clean water – for a prolonged period beginning 9 October 2023, and cutting off and hindering electricity supplies from at least 8 October 2023 until today. This took place alongside other attacks on civilians, including those queuing for food; obstruction of aid delivery by humanitarian agencies; and attacks on and killing of aid workers, which forced many agencies to cease or limit their operations in Gaza. (ICC 2024a, emphasis added)

The effects of the use of starvation as a method of warfare include, in the words of the application, "malnutrition, dehydration, profound suffering and an increasing number

of deaths among the Palestinian population, including of babies, other children, and women" (*ibid*.).

The application raises the question of *famine* in present-day Gaza:

Famine is present in some areas of Gaza and is imminent in other areas. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned more than two months ago, "1.1 million people in Gaza are facing catastrophic hunger – the highest number of people ever recorded – anywhere, anytime" as a result of an "entirely manmade disaster". (ICC 2024a)

Israel today is acting with the single-minded purpose of taking control of all Palestinian territories. Israel has already declared itself a Jewish state – a departure from self-description as a secular state in 1948, when it was created. Under current law, Palestinians and Arabs living in Israel are officially second-class citizens. This regime is now to extend to the entire region that Israel wants to occupy and control. Unless Israel is stopped, there can be no peace in the region or in the world. Solidarity with Palestine and joining the struggle to stop the war is not only necessary for the survival of Palestinians but also for our own future.

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