

Gaza Humanitarian Mechanism: Issues & Potential Solutions

The Gaza Humanitarian Fund (GHF) mechanism for distributing food aid in Gaza, which began operations in late May, says it has already distributed over 13.5 million meals to Gazans. However, the GHF has been plagued by security, capacity, communication, and logistics issues, and has been rejected by the U.N. and most humanitarian aid groups. Ensuring successful aid distribution in Gaza, on the assumption that the GHF-run mechanism will persist, requires combining it with other aid distribution networks, particularly central kitchens, water, fuel, and medicine, to ensure widespread and more equitable access for Gazans. That will require resumed cooperation between GHF, the IDF, the U.N., and other organizations operating in Gaza.

Background

The GHF is intended to serve as an alternative aid mechanism to the existing humanitarian aid mechanism for Gaza, which includes the distribution of food, water, medical, and other aid from the U.N. and humanitarian groups via a large network of distribution sites, including both small distribution points and central kitchens and bakeries. Israel has said that the existing mechanism allows for major diversion of aid by Hamas and other armed groups via looting or more subtle means. This aid is then hoarded and resold at higher prices to sustain their operations. By replacing the aid mechanism, Israel hopes to limit Hamas' ability to govern in Gaza and weaken the group's finances and control.

Communication Issues

The GHF has struggled to clearly communicate to Gazans which aid distribution sites are open on each day, the procedures for arriving safely at each site and receiving aid, and restrictions on what can be brought to distribution sites. Key channels, such as the GHF website, remain in development, while others were started only recently and have few followers, leading to a profusion of fake channels. The foundation's Facebook page (founded May 28) now has 70,000 followers, and a WhatsApp group set up to deliver real-time updates has roughly 900 members. While the situation is improving, the slow and inconsistent start limits the reach of the GHF's official messaging and gives greater space to rumors and misleading information about aid.

Gazans are expressing frustration with the quantity and timing of information they receive from GHF. Announcements about which aid centers will be open the following day at 6am, with lines beginning at 5am, are being published between 11pm and 2am each night. This requires Gazans to forgo sleep, lest they miss the announcement, and gives them little time to plan what is often a complex or dangerous journey to the distribution site. Aid sites also open at different and inconsistent times, adding to the confusion.

Hamas claims about massacres at aid sites have scared away many Gazans, reducing uptake in an already-fragmented information environment without trust between the GHF and Gazans. While many Hamas claims appear to be false, there have been real clashes near aid sites both between Gazan armed groups and the IDF and Hamas. Gazans are afraid of the possibility of being targeted by either the IDF or Hamas, leading many to eschew the mechanism entirely.

To address these challenges, the GHF could:

- Activate the GHF website and heavily promote GHF social media channels.
- Continue to advertise announcements and instructions across all social media, including popular Gazan social media channels.
- Keep aid sites open as consistently as possible, and notify Gazans which sites will be open the day before.

Israel could:

- Have the IDF relay key communications both on its social media channels and via loudspeaker near distribution sites.
- Work with GHF to drop leaflets explaining the aid process with links to GHF channels.

Capacity/Quality Issues

Current GHF operations are insufficient to meet current demand, both at each site and overall quantity, increasing crowding and security risks. GHF sites often run out of food with large lines still waiting for aid, and because of the small number of functional sites—it is rare that all sites are open simultaneously, and all sites were closed from June 4-6 for maintenance to try and expand their capacity—huge crowds cluster at each active site.

Aid sites are not well-distributed across Gaza, leaving major service gaps. The three distribution sites near the Morag corridor between Khan Younis and Rafah can only reach a certain proportion of Palestinians, while the Netzarim aid site in central Gaza is only functional part of the time. Civilians in Gaza City, meanwhile, are unable to access any aid distribution site. While the GHF has said it plans to add additional sites in central and northern Gaza, more aid is required in these areas in the interim through existing channels.

Aid is reportedly not being equally distributed at the sites, disadvantaging women, children, and the elderly. While the GHF has said it will work on creating specific distribution times for them, and has told women to ask GHF staff for help in receiving their aid, the current situation heavily disadvantages these groups, who cannot get to the front of the line easily and are liable to have aid stolen from them by malicious actors. There are also concerns about the general safety of vulnerable populations in long lines, which are exposed to often-harsh weather, if many men, some of them armed, are present.

Key aid components like water cannot be feasibly distributed via the GHF mechanism, and the contents of aid boxes are inconsistent. The contents of the aid boxes are primarily dry and canned goods, including pasta, flour, salt, sugar, lentils, and canned vegetables, among other items. Some, but not all, packages contain cooking oil. Cooking many of these ingredients requires water, which is too heavy to be transported by individuals in the necessary quantities for a week of cooking and consumption, as well as cooking implements. Many Gazans may lack consistent access to both, meaning the GHF aid cannot stand alone.

At present, there is no mechanism to ensure recipients are not collecting multiple boxes on consecutive days, which, combined with the above problems, means the strongest or most aggressive will receive the most aid. While some have advocated for classifying recipients by ID number or other information to make sure aid is distributed in a more equitable way, lack of trust may lead Gazans to avoid the mechanism if it requires too much information for fear it will be transferred to Israel and used against them.



To reduce these problems, the GHF could:

- Increase the number of aid sites, particularly in central and northern Gaza.
- Designate specific and separate times for the women, children, and elderly to collect aid.
- Standardize the general contents of aid boxes to ensure each includes key items like cooking oil.
- Include some ready-to-eat meals inside the packages to make GHF aid more immediately useful.

Israel could:

- Facilitate more frequent delivery of water via truck across the Strip.
- Allow WFP and WCK, as well as other non-UNRWA partners, to re-activate and consistently operate centralized bakeries and kitchens in specific locations in Gaza to augment GHF aid and reduce pressure on the sites as they scale up.
- Deploy a more targeted model for determining who will receive aid each day, based on location, family name, or ID number.

The U.N. and humanitarian organizations could:

- Accept the existence of the GHF mechanism and push for other aid mechanisms and delivery systems, specifically for centralized kitchens and bakeries, water and medicine distribution, and interim general aid distribution where GHF is not present.

The international community could:

- Push for rapid expansion and improved implementation of the GHF mechanism alongside continuation of the aforementioned key international aid mechanisms.
- Continue to press for a negotiated ceasefire which includes a massive increase in aid.

Security

Crowding and food scarcity drive security risks. With too many people attempting to pick up aid from too few sites, crowding endangers Gazans, site guards, and aid workers alike, as evidenced by the stampede that shut down an aid site on the mechanism's first day. Fear that supplies will run out at sites also leads to chaos in the distribution lines and has led to looting and damage to the sites themselves. While the GHF closed sites on June 4-6 to expand their capacity, more sites are necessary to split up the crowds, increase effective aid delivery, and reduce the risk to all involved.

Scarcity also creates a secondary black market for aid products. Gazans report that high-value products like sugar, semolina, and cooking oil are often taken from the aid packages by opportunistic actors and resold at high prices. This occurs with other aid distribution mechanisms, but is enhanced by the scarcity of aid due to GHF's capacity constraints. Until aid is plentiful, the incentive for looting, hoarding, and price-gouging remains.

Gaps in communication and failures to obey instructions are causing security incidents that endanger Gazans and damage trust in the aid mechanism. Gazans are often attempting to reach the aid sites, which are located inside areas with active military operations, before the scheduled time or not on approved routes, which sparks friction with the IDF and can lead to the aid sites being shut down temporarily or for the day. Better communication with Gazans, higher trust established by repeated successful aid provision, and other logistical measures are necessary to reduce these risks.



Aid sites represent a soft target, and the GHF has stated that Hamas has forced them to halt operations multiple times due to direct threats. Hamas may also target the IDF or Gazans near aid sites or attempt to spark fighting at the sites. This is a complex problem without immediate solutions. The IDF can work to minimize military operations in the vicinity of the sites beyond securing them, and smaller crowds may lower the risk of a security incident, but stopping a direct attack on a distribution site requires the IDF to stay close.

The reported recruitment of anti-Hamas Gazan militias like the Yasser Abu Shabab - Popular Forces to secure routes to distribution sites in the Rafah area has some logic to it, but poses serious risks. The bar for Hamas to attack dissident Gazan actors is low, and some gunfights have already reportedly broken out. Moreover, local militias are unlikely to uphold professional standards, may exploit their position, and are often just as opposed to Israel as Hamas, making them an unsuitable foundation for medium- to long-term alternative governance in Gaza.

Aid trucks carrying GHF aid are vulnerable to looting and constrained by ground conditions, like all other aid shipments. The most effective direct protection for aid convoys would be the IDF, and a greater and consistent flow of aid would indirectly protect convoys by reducing looting out of desperation, as opposed to looting by Hamas or armed gangs for profit. Aid convoys are often held up by military operations along their planned path, delays in approvals, and poor communication with COGAT and the IDF. Running joint convoys with GHF, at least for part of the route, and restarting the coordination mechanism with COGAT are key.

To limit these issues, GHF could:

- Expand the number and locations of aid sites to reduce crowding.
- Continue renovations to the distribution sites to improve their capacity and security, and build new sites to higher standards.

Israel could:

- Alongside the new GHF centers of distribution, reinstate some components of the former mechanism, such as clear aid corridors either kept constantly open or for fixed periods each day. These could be used by trusted actors like GHF, WCK, and WFP to specific warehouses or sites, and reactivate coordination with the U.N. on aid convoys to help ease the backlog of aid on the Gazan side of Kerem Shalom and facilitate improved aid delivery. Reintroducing humanitarian aid corridors might reinvigorate Israeli concerns about Hamas diversion of aid, but is likely necessary to avoid further deterioration in the humanitarian situation until GHF reaches full operational strength.
- Consider developing a more reliable and professional Palestinian security force to help secure aid routes, utilizing the U.S. Office of the Security Coordinator, which has significant experience in this.