

HPG REPORT

Oppression, liberation and humanitarianism in Palestine, Myanmar and Sudan

HPG
Humanitarian
Policy Group



ODI Global

Nora Hassanien, Manny Maung and Dustin Barter^{ID}

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About the authors

Author names are ordered randomly, reflecting the equally critical contribution of each author.

ORCID numbers are given where available. Please click on the ID icon next to an author's name in order to access their ORCID listing.

Nora Hassanien is a Research Associate in HPG at ODI Global.

Manny Maung is a Research Associate in HPG at ODI Global.

Dustin Barter^{ID} is a Senior Research Fellow in HPG at ODI Global.

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Acronyms

CMCC	Civil–Military Coordination Center
COGAT	Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories
ERO	ethnic resistance organisation
ERR	Emergency Response Room
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHF	Gaza Humanitarian Foundation
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
INSO	INGO Security Organisation
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
LNAs	local and national actors
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA	official development assistance
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USAID	US Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Programme

Executive summary

“Humanitarian problems cannot be fixed with humanitarian solutions”

This study emphasises the urgent need to address deep structural issues that remain ill-addressed by the international humanitarian and broader aid sectors. As this paper elucidates, oppression extends far beyond violent conflict to involve systematic efforts to impede human flourishing. Liberation, however, does not imply that humanitarian actors replace political movements or pursue predetermined political outcomes. Rather, it requires recognising that humanitarian action operates within structures of power and can either reinforce or challenge the conditions that perpetuate crisis and human suffering. The study’s intention is to make such dynamics more visible and be propositional not just in why, but also how, the international humanitarian system should respond.

Focusing on Palestine, Myanmar and Sudan, this paper has a significant focus on how colonial and predatory capitalist dynamics are driving and perpetuating crises. The three countries are home to some of the worst and most intractable humanitarian catastrophes globally, involving genocide, mass displacement and vast humanitarian needs. However, they are ultimately political crises, in which humanitarian actors and response are routinely co-opted in ways that are detrimental to affected populations, both in the short and the long term. In this regard, this study builds upon existing literature on humanitarian resistance (most notably Kamal, 2023; Slim, 2022), long-term debates about aid and global governance (Ferguson, 1994; Duffield, 2001), and the Humanitarian Policy Group’s work on navigating neutrality, relief and rights (see Moallin et al., 2025). The study takes into account both policy and practice, emphasising the need for us all to move beyond the typical humanitarian purview.

The paper first sets out an analytical framework and research approach that guides the reader into the logic and focus of the study. It outlines what we mean when we talk about oppression and liberation, and how it relates to humanitarian actors. The framework also emphasises the importance of civic space and activity, which are fundamental to addressing many of the challenges identified in this paper. Whereas mutual aid is increasingly reduced to instrumentalisation for improved humanitarian delivery (particularly for access and efficiency), our framework emphasises the need for a more holistic orientation. In this regard, the paper also draws and builds upon a growing body of work on solidarity scholarship.

The study then examines the three countries, beginning with Palestine, before shifting to Myanmar and then Sudan. The realities in each country are uniquely horrifying, yet they are also home to globally resonant pursuits of liberation and ultimately, humanity. The following are brief insights into each country chapter:

- **Palestine:** Owing to extremes of violence and widespread complicity, this chapter is the longest. It elucidates the dynamics of settler colonialism, the manufacturing of crisis and Israel's strategic manipulation to create humanitarian camouflage for its atrocities. The chapter also explores the concept of *sumud* (steadfastness), as Palestinians explain their efforts to not just survive attempted erasure, but also pursue liberation.
- **Myanmar:** The focus is on how extractive industries and the military junta's continuation of colonial violence is driving crisis across the country, yet most of the international humanitarian sector pursues patchwork response. However, the population continues to resist tyranny, with feminist humanitarianism and leadership being critical to not just meeting immediate needs, but also reshaping social relations away from oppressive, violent patriarchal structures.
- **Sudan:** This chapter examines the centrality of the United Arab Emirates in exacerbating and prolonging the war, particularly through exchanging weapons for gold, building upon years of capitalist extraction driving conflict across Sudan. The analysis then shifts to mutual aid dynamics, cautioning against instrumentalisation to instead ensure adequate support for civil and political activity. *Nafeer* (collective action and solidarity) alongside mutual aid efforts to rebuild social fabric must be not simply praised, but also coherently supported by humanitarian actors.

The paper concludes that the three countries, individually and collectively, cannot continue to be framed and treated primarily as humanitarian crises. Oppression, particularly in the forms of colonialism and predatory capitalism, underpin the tyranny and brutality in each country, where the international humanitarian system and actors must better engage with these realities. The challenges are immense, but the status quo is no longer tenable. Conversely, humanitarian action is uniquely placed to enable (through providing important scaffolding), rather than impede, people's efforts to pursue liberation.

1 Research framing and approach

The pace of globally consequential ruptures has been accelerating in recent years, from the Covid-19 pandemic to genocides and widespread breaches of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). This poses immense challenges both for humanitarian and aid systems, and for the future of humanity. This chapter sets out some key elements, as they pertain to the ensuing analysis, recognising that international aid systems have remained resistant to change. Even more concerning, years of incremental, albeit insufficient, progress towards better ways of working have been unravelling. The scale of the challenge is immense: 252 million people were expected to require humanitarian assistance in 2026, yet funding fell 10% in 2024, contracted significantly further in 2025 (Pearson, forthcoming) and is likely even worse for 2026.

Accentuated by recent aid cuts, the humanitarian sector is undergoing a process of soul searching that is increasingly leading to a bifurcation between those championing reductionism (i.e. a shrinking of the system to prioritise saving money and a narrower focus for the sector) and those committed to a more holistic endeavour, with a spectrum of positions in between. The United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is at the forefront of reductionism, pushing for humanitarian ‘back to basics’ and ‘hyper prioritisation’ (OCHA, 2025). This direction has been fortified by the United States (US) injecting an initial \$2 billion (US dollars, unless stated otherwise) into OCHA’s pooled funding to be narrowly focused on so-called life-saving assistance and spent within six months. This included other conditionalities, such as being anti-gender, only for 17 countries, and ultimately ‘programmed in the American national interest’, according to the US Ambassador to the UN, Mike Waltz (Miolene, 2026). The US contributed a further \$1.8 billion to OCHA in May 2026, and extended the timeline for implementation to 12 months (ibid.).

In contrast to the reductionists, those committed to more holistic humanitarianism are building upon the years-long transition towards integrated, so-called ‘nexus’ programming that supports locally led action and connects with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, the Grand Bargain and similar commitments. For some actors, this direction also centres on working in solidarity with and supporting justice for crisis-affected populations, including critical examination of how humanitarian systems interact with broader civic space and activity (see Moallin et al., 2025).

This study engages with the related tensions, ultimately rejecting the reductionist direction and emphasising how more holistic, liberating humanitarianism is not just preferable, but also essential for the scale and complexity of today’s crises. The rest of this chapter provides the research framing and approach, before the paper examines how such dynamics unfold for three of the world’s most acute crises, in Palestine, Myanmar and Sudan. Critically, the paper not only focuses on the scale of the challenges, but also seeks to elucidate how humanitarian action is being reconfigured by local and national actors (LNAs), particularly in pursuit of liberation. In this regard, the paper is propositional, building upon the analysis and ideas related to humanitarian resistance (see Slim, 2022; Kamal, 2023) and concerns over the depoliticising impacts of neutrality (see Moallin et al., 2025). Although neutrality

does arise in the ensuing analysis, this paper instead centres the need to address broader structural injustices, particularly colonial legacies, predatory capitalism and the manipulation of humanitarian assistance, as defining features of the crises in Palestine, Myanmar and Sudan.

1.1 Oppression: colonial legacies and contemporary manifestations

This paper focuses significantly on colonial legacies and contemporary manifestations as central to understanding the contours of oppression in all three countries and the intersection with and inseparability from humanitarian and aid systems. This focus is important: colonialism is not merely confined to history, but is an ongoing structural system oriented towards the elimination of the native as a political and economic presence (Wolfe, 2006). This structural understanding is essential for comprehending that the crises in Palestine, Myanmar and Sudan are not accidental but actively produced through policies designed to prevent territorial consolidation or people's liberation. Colonialism often operates through three interconnected mechanisms that are most acutely evident in settler colonialism in Palestine, but also manifests in Myanmar and Sudan:

- **Territorial acquisition:** The seizure and control of land through settlements, military zones and administrative restrictions.
- **Resource extraction:** Economic appropriation of water, minerals, agricultural land and labour.
- **Native elimination:** Systematic displacement, legal disenfranchisement, and historical and cultural erasure (ibid.).

Alongside these three mechanisms, colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary crises, and neocolonialism continues, particularly through inequitable economic relations. As Walter Rodney (2018) writes on Africa, European colonialism and the slave trade underdeveloped the continent, with Africa's resources instead developing Europe. In Latin America, European plunder of resources similarly impoverished the region (Galeano, 2009), while the neocolonial imposition of free market, anti-state reforms during the 1980s reversed Latin America's substantial industrial and economic progress (Palma, 2008). A thriving region was once again relegated to a site of extraction for powerful interests. For this study, both Myanmar and Sudan are key sites of neocolonial resource extraction to serve the global economy, while Palestine faces enclosure, erasure and dispossession through Israeli policies and violence. Rather than just being features of the crises in each country, such dynamics have major humanitarian implications.

Over the past two years, significant attention has been paid to declining humanitarian aid, yet deeper systems of oppression and crisis drivers remain marginal to many reform discussions. Focusing on the symptoms of immediate needs and displacement patterns results in the continued framing of many crises as humanitarian rather than political. Resource extraction is illustrative, where jade, rare earth and critical minerals are extracted en masse from Myanmar, and likewise gold and other resources from Sudan, enriching external actors and feeding insatiable global demand. Illicit financial flows that

enable such trade to occur enrich domestic elites and their global counterparts, while denying local communities much-needed revenue. Various Global North financial institutions are deeply implicated in enabling the illicit, opaque flows of money.

Stemming illicit financial flows could be far more impactful than current volumes of aid (Bagree, 2026). For example, for the countries grouped together as ‘sub-Saharan Africa’, the trade value gap – the difference between reported exports from and imports to resource-receiving countries – was estimated at \$152.9 billion in 2022 (Global Financial Integrity, 2026). It offers one indicator of the magnitude of illicit financial flows compared with aid; the estimate would be enough to fund all people targeted globally for humanitarian assistance in 2025 – three times over. By contrast, net official development assistance (ODA) to sub-Saharan Africa in 2022 only amounted to \$29 billion (OECD, 2024).

Even more explicitly, recent years and months have witnessed a resurgence and even normalisation of colonial practices. This is perhaps most evident with Israel ramping up its settler colonialism across the West Bank, genocide in Gaza and other territorial expansion, including into Lebanon and Syria, totalling over 1,000 square kilometres, as of May 2026 (Smith et al., 2026). As examined in Chapter 2, Israel’s colonial endeavour (with backing from the US and Germany in particular) is exacerbating Palestinian suffering and ensuring humanitarian needs remain high. Elsewhere, the proliferation of proxy wars, such as in Sudan and Yemen, alongside Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, are further illustrative of neocolonial interference and expansionism. This is fortified by a US administration threatening to colonise Greenland, abducting the Venezuelan head of state, blockading Cuba and killing the Iranian leadership, while seeking to take control of natural resources across many of these geographies.

As this report elucidates the dynamics relating to oppression, the historical and contemporary realities of colonialism are centred because they inform how humanitarianism evolves. This is embodied in the mounting concerns over the formal sector’s seeming indifference, or ‘neutrality’, towards widespread injustices (Wando, 2025). This is not to say that the current humanitarian system and its actors can address the scale of colonial legacies and contemporary practices, but conscious effort is needed to avoid complicity in the structures of oppression. It also requires not becoming entrenched service providers that inadequately alleviate deep structural inequalities emanating from divide-and-rule oppression (see Moallin et al., 2026).

1.1.1 Predatory capitalism driving humanitarian needs

Understanding the degree to which predatory capitalism is driving humanitarian needs, from micro to macro levels, can no longer be classed as peripheral, nor considered outside the humanitarian purview. In a now pervasive form across the world, predatory capitalism is increasingly incompatible with human rights, social justice and even democracy. Power and wealth continue to concentrate within a transnational oligarchy class. Rather than rein in capitalism’s excesses, governments continue to take on unsustainable debts to ameliorate the most severe impacts (Streeck, 2024). The implications for international humanitarian and aid systems are arguably most evident in relation to

unprecedented levels of inequality and rapidly expanding and dangerous techno-feudalism – namely, how big technology companies have gained such immense control over people’s lives and global power structures (see Varoufakis, 2024).

Despite widespread opposition to the so-called ‘1%’ elite following the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, inequality has continued escalating, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic. This is occurring against a backdrop where even the capitalist bastion, the World Bank, has publicly been sounding the alarm since 2016 on the need to address inequality (World Bank, 2016). Similarly, the International Monetary Fund has ramped up its focus on inequality (Donnan, 2015). It is also nearly 20 years since Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) comprehensively illustrated how more-equal societies almost always do better; while in 2014, Piketty released his seminal text *Capital in the twenty-first century*, which highlighted alarming inequality dynamics (Piketty, 2014). Annual inequality reports by Oxfam have continued to demonstrate not just the scale of the problem, but also how it is rapidly getting much worse; in 2025, billionaire wealth increased three times faster than the previous five years, while 12 billionaires have more wealth than the bottom half of the world’s population (approximately four billion people). Additionally, democratic erosion is seven times more likely in unequal countries (Maitland et al., 2026); high inequality and elite capture negatively impact civic space.

Predatory capitalism and related inequalities are not just abstract global phenomena, but also inextricably linked with numerous humanitarian crises. In the Horn of Africa, the demand for livestock from Gulf States has fuelled extractivist economic relations leading to widespread armed conflict, displacement and land dispossession. A continued focus on the climate crisis and inter-ethnic tensions as the main drivers of violent conflict has diverted attention from predatory capitalism as a root cause (Duffield and Stockton, 2023). Similarly, in Kenya, Nigeria and elsewhere, humanitarian needs relate significantly to deeply entrenched inequalities (often relating back to colonially imposed divisions), underpinned by state negligence in addressing them. Aid systems continue to step in, yet root causes of vulnerability remain largely unaddressed (see Moallin et al., 2026). Economic issues and inequality are typically viewed as development issues, whereas humanitarianism is reduced to focusing on the subsequent human consequences.

The rise of techno-feudalism, the unchecked power and control of tech companies (Varoufakis, 2024), is increasingly becoming one of the starkest illustrations of the humanitarian consequences relating to predatory capitalism. Facebook’s role in enabling hate speech that fuelled genocide of the Rohingya in Myanmar back in 2016–2017 is well documented (see Amnesty International, 2022a), including accounts from former Facebook employees (Wynn-Williams, 2025). More recently, Palantir and other tech companies have attracted widespread criticisms for contributing to Israel’s genocide in Gaza, including facial recognition and other software that facilitate death and destruction (Business and Human Rights Centre, 2024). The starkest culmination of many of these interrelated elements is what Francesca Albanese refers to as the ‘economy of genocide’, in which many private sector actors, tech and otherwise, profit handsomely from atrocities (Albanese, 2025). As one interviewee for this paper remarked in reference to the extremities of violence and manipulation of humanitarian action: ‘Gaza is ground zero for everything we are seeing globally, it is the testing ground.’

1.2 Liberation: pursuing structural transformation

For this paper, liberation is understood as the pursuit of freedom from systems of oppression, domination and exploitation, systems that often produce humanitarian need. Liberation encompasses efforts by individuals and communities to secure their rights, dignity, safety, self-determination and collective flourishing (Freire, 1970). In humanitarian contexts, liberation does not imply that humanitarian actors replace political movements or pursue predetermined political outcomes. Rather, it requires recognising that humanitarian action operates within structures of power and can either reinforce or challenge the conditions that perpetuate crisis and human suffering. This understanding draws on traditions of anti-colonial, decolonial and liberation thought that view freedom not just as the absence of violence, but also as the collective capacity of individuals and communities to transform the structures that constrain their dignity, agency and self-determination (Fanon, 1961; Erakat, 2019).

1.2.1 Protracted crises demand profound humanitarian change

Whether we are inescapably headed towards a neo-Hobbesian world of continually escalating violent competition amongst actors remains to be seen, but for humanitarian and other aid actors, the world's recent trajectory is cause for immense concern and action. The intensity and breadth of oppression globally, not just in Palestine, Myanmar and Sudan, are exacerbating and perpetuating crises, and demand profound humanitarian system change. Over 90% of humanitarian funding requirements are for protracted crises, reflecting the need to address complex crisis drivers, with five crises having annual response plans in place for more than two decades (Pearson et al., 2025). However, the 'humanitarian reset', a decade of the Grand Bargain, UN80 and myriad other reform efforts often obfuscate crisis drivers in favour of inward-looking reforms. The authors recognise that the formal (aid-funded) humanitarian system can only do so much, but this paper foregrounds the meta challenges and emphasises the need to embrace more profound humanitarian change. As written regarding Myanmar's polycrisis, 'international actors need to understand this reality, rather than espouse neutrality that is creating a veil of ignorance' (Naw et al., 2025: 9).

Entrenched oppression and ensuing crises are not inevitable, nor is that reality being accepted by many actors beyond the formal humanitarian system. Activists and social movements continue to form powerful countermovements pursuing liberation, from Indigenous land rights activists in India (Shiva, 2013) to a globally relevant push for post-extractivism in Ecuador (Riofrancos, 2020), to youth-led protests in Bangladesh and Nepal overthrowing oppressive governments in recent years. Palestine, Myanmar and Sudan are similarly home to dynamic struggles for liberation. However, as written elsewhere, the formal humanitarian sector has an uneasy relationship with activists and social movements, where narrow and depoliticising interpretations of neutrality are typically prioritised over solidarity or even pragmatic engagement with activists (see Moallin et al., 2025). As the scale of crisis continues escalating, there may be opportunities for realignment, which is already occurring – often in spite, not because, of the formal humanitarian system.

1.2.2 Closing civic space and humanitarian intersectionality

This report builds upon an early 2025 paper by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), *A humanitarian trap? Navigating neutrality, relief and rights in Ethiopia, Myanmar, Syria and Guatemala* (Moallin et al., 2025). A central theme for that study was the tension between addressing immediate humanitarian needs and pursuits of justice, where relief was often prioritised over rights. In turn, humanitarian funding was seen to distort civic activity away from pursuing justice to instead focus on meeting basic needs. As per the report title, a critical line of enquiry was how aid actors can avoid and exit the humanitarian trap of perpetual service delivery. Shortly after that study, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) was dismantled and many other donors drastically cut aid. When combined with Israel's continued genocide in Gaza, the humanitarian and broader aid sectors continue to undergo an ongoing existential crisis. One result has been renewed calls for solidarity and justice (Barter and Fouad, 2024), while mutual aid has also garnered heightened attention (Posada and Ahimbisibwe, 2025). For example, the United Kingdom (UK) government more than doubled direct funding to local Sudanese groups for 2026, although the increase from £6 million to £15 million only represents about 10% of UK humanitarian funding to Sudan for the year (FCDO, 2026).

Such dynamics must also be set against a backdrop of severely closing civic space across the world. The focus countries for this paper, Palestine, Myanmar and Sudan, are all examples of acutely constrained civic space, yet also home to particularly dynamic resistance and pursuits of liberation. Globally, civic space is being systematically eroded through financial restrictions, laws and other state and corporate means, with marginalised and politically oriented actors facing the most acute suppression (O'Connell, 2023). There are many dimensions of interconnectivity between civic space and crises globally, such as in the US and the UK: suppression of Palestine-focused activism has been widespread, including efforts to proscribe activists as terrorists (see Liberty, 2025). This is combined with insidious media and social media manipulation that impedes civic discourse and efforts to hold malicious actors accountable. HPG research has also emphasised the importance of civic space and activity, from its role in enhancing state-led response (see Bryant et al., 2025) to contributing towards addressing structural inequalities (Moallin et al., 2026). Consequently, civic space and activity are a cross-cutting theme throughout this research.

1.2.3 Mutual aid: looking beyond the buzz

Early iterations of this research sought to focus primarily on mutual aid, but it quickly became evident that research on mutual aid is becoming a crowded space. A comprehensive and compelling analysis by ALNAP highlights how mutual aid can provide 'timely, relevant and sustainable assistance grounded in local realities' where international support 'can amplify the core strengths of mutual aid' (Posada and Ahimbisibwe, 2025: 1–5). Others highlight how mutual aid can sometimes offer an alternative to stagnant 'localisation' progress (Local to Global Protection, n.d.) that emphasises collective care (Junli, 2026). One concern, however, is that mutual aid is often framed as a modality primarily for better delivering humanitarian assistance, thus instrumentalising it, rather than considering how mutual aid relates to broader liberation. For example, Palestine, Myanmar and Sudan are often used as examples

of mutual aid effectiveness, but less attention is paid to the relationship with broader civic and political activity to address the drivers of crises, which is a major focus for many mutual aid actors. Share Trust's (n.d.) '*Passing the buck*' work has such an orientation, where LNAs are reduced to economic efficiency. This report seeks to examine these broader issues within the overarching analytical focus on oppression, liberation and humanitarianism.

1.3 Solidarity scholarship as a research approach

This paper sought to utilise and adhere to what has been termed 'solidarity scholarship' or iterations thereof, as a research approach. Such an approach 'goes beyond writing to involve explicit involvement in and support for the resistance that is at the centre of enquiry' and has 'an epistemological belief in the importance of solidarity for making sense of subaltern resistance' (Barter and Hpauna, 2025: 199). This requires going beyond 'do no harm' approaches to centre relationships, trust and critical reflexivity throughout enquiry (Lamb et al., 2026). The authors recognise the need to do more than simply claiming solidarity; acts of everyday listening, embeddedness and critically examining structures of power and domination are essential (see Loong, 2025). This included a 'realist ontology' that centres actors' agency when examining structures of power, domination and resistance (Chandra, 2015).

For the authors, this solidarity-based approach has involved years of being active in and collaborating with civil society movements, particularly relating to Myanmar and Palestine for this study, while ensuring an emancipatory research agenda and approach are pursued. It does not mean doing away with scholarly rigour, but it values embedded and reflexive inquiry rather than claiming detached objectivity. This research approach also builds upon what has been termed 'humanitarian resistance', which seeks to move beyond depoliticising interpretations of neutrality to instead explore how humanitarianism can better align with pursuits of justice (see Slim, 2022; Kamal, 2023). This study also builds upon a substantive body of HPG work, including on tensions between relief and rights (see Moallin et al., 2025), revolutionary state-building in Myanmar (see Naw et al., 2025) and state-civil society dynamics (see Mohamed and Barter, 2026).

Guided by the above research approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with local, national and international actors, totalling 18 women and 17 men. This included operational humanitarian actors (formal and informal), human rights activists, feminist movement representatives, academics, philanthropists and other adjacent actors, in relation to all three countries. Palestine has the most extensive focus in this paper, partly owing to the scale of atrocities, but also because HPG has other existing and upcoming bodies of work related to Myanmar and Sudan.

The research team also drew upon decades of their own embeddedness within humanitarian and aid systems, formal and informal, including operational response roles for numerous sudden onset and protracted crises across continents. This involved ongoing critical reflection and discussions between authors, as they sought to focus on the deep structural challenges faced by humanitarian and broader aid actors, while bearing in mind the very real operational constraints that are faced.

2 Palestine: ground zero

The Occupied Palestinian Territories, referred to as ‘Palestine’ throughout, and the Gaza Strip in particular (hereafter Gaza), offer an illuminating lens through which to understand the intersections of oppression, liberation and humanitarian action, not just within Palestine but also globally. As one international humanitarian interviewee reflected:

It is ‘ground zero’ – the testing ground for weapons, surveillance technologies, militarised humanitarianism, as well as for political acceptance of mass atrocity, the erosion of international humanitarian law, and misinformation and disinformation campaigns.

The consequences extend far beyond Palestine, carrying implications for authoritarianism, civil liberties, international law and the future of humanitarianism globally. As a Palestinian academic interviewee warned: ‘What is being normalised in Palestine will not stop in Palestine.’

At the time of writing, Gaza is experiencing one of the most devastating humanitarian catastrophes in recent history. Nearly all of Gaza’s 2.1 million people have been displaced, often repeatedly, while access to shelter, food, healthcare, water, education and livelihoods has collapsed (OCHA, 2026a). Gaza has recorded the world’s highest concentration of famine-affected populations (Al Jazeera, 2026a), the highest number of child amputees per capita anywhere in the world (B’Tselem, 2025; UNICEF, 2025), and has had to create new language to keep pace with the scale of destruction: ‘WCNSF’ – Wounded Child, No Surviving Family – is now a documented medical category (Amer and Marsi, 2024). Humanitarian workers have been killed at unprecedented rates, making Gaza the deadliest place in the world to be an aid worker (INSO, 2025; DRC, 2025).

Yet framing what is happening in Palestine solely as a humanitarian emergency obscures the structural systems producing these conditions. Understanding ‘oppression’ in Palestine therefore requires an understanding of current and historical settler-colonial dynamics as well as an understanding of the economic incentives surrounding crises. To do this, the current crises in Palestine should be situated within the broader history of Palestinian dispossession. Over more than a century, Palestinians have experienced successive waves of displacement, land seizure, restrictions on movement and recurrent violations of their rights. Beginning under the British Mandate, accelerating through the Nakba of 1948,¹ and continuing through decades of Israeli occupation, settlement expansion and blockade, these processes have progressively fragmented Palestinian society while generating recurring humanitarian crises alongside ongoing struggles for self-determination (Pappé, 2006; Khalidi, 2020; UNCTAD, 2024). The crises affecting Palestinians in Palestine and the diaspora, when seen within this historical context,

¹ The Nakba (Arabic for ‘catastrophe’) refers to the displacement of approximately 700,000 Palestinians and the depopulation of hundreds of Palestinian communities during the 1947–1949 war and the establishment of the state of Israel (UN General Assembly, 1948; Khalidi, 2020).

are not accidental. They are the predictable outcomes of a project aimed at territorial acquisition, ethnic cleansing, fragmentation and the erasure of Palestinian political, social, cultural and economic life (see Pappé, 2006; Khalidi, 2020).

Humanitarian actors typically try to address the problems they face with ever narrower technical solutions, particularly ways to ‘do aid better’ or more efficiently. However, approaches that lack sufficient political, cultural and economic analysis and ensuing strategy to address identified issues, risk unintentionally reinforcing harm and acting in opposition to broader humanitarian objectives. This is particularly the case in Palestine, where aid is controlled and weaponised by Israel for oppressive and profiteering ends. This argument has consistently been made by organisations such as Al-Haq, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights and the Palestinian NGO Network (Al-Haq et al., 2025). As one interviewee from a Palestinian non-governmental organisation (NGO) put it:

Humanitarian problems rarely need humanitarian solutions. The solution to Palestine is political. But humanitarian actors can either reinforce the system causing harm, or contribute towards challenging it.

This chapter examines how humanitarian action is both enabled by systems of oppression, as well as weaponised by them for harmful ends that are antithetical to humanitarian values. It explores how humanitarian assistance can both alleviate suffering and, at times, become entangled in the very structures that produce vulnerability, displacement and dependency. Complicity, in this context, is rarely the result of deliberate malice on the part of traditional aid agencies. Rather, it emerges from Israel’s overt attempts at weaponisation of aid, broader structural pressures and organisations’ internalised prejudices. Humanitarian organisations face genuine dilemmas, particularly balancing the imperatives to maintain access, secure funding and deliver assistance in conditions of extreme need, against the risk of legitimising or accommodating systems of oppression.

Situated within the broader context of Israel’s ongoing project of dispossession, fragmentation (see Nabulsi, 2024) and erasure, this chapter analyses some of these tensions, alongside highlighting the agency of Palestinians, whose struggles for liberation, self-determination and justice continue to challenge the conditions that make humanitarian intervention necessary in the first place. Alongside critique, the chapter highlights lessons that the humanitarian sector might draw from Palestinian experiences of resistance and *sumud* (steadfastness), offering insights into how humanitarian action might be inspired to recalibrate in ways that are more congruent with humanitarian values and more courageously based in solidarity.

2.1 Oppression, colonialism and manufactured crisis

The crises in Palestine are fundamentally political, produced through policy choices rooted in occupation and sustained through systems of control, dispossession and economic extraction. Settler colonialism operates through notions of racialised hierarchies (explored later in this chapter) as well as what Wolfe (2006) terms a ‘logic of elimination’. In Palestine, this logic manifests not only materially but

also culturally, psychologically and epistemically. Former Deputy Knesset Speaker Nissim Vaturi made the objective explicit: ‘We have one goal: erasing the Gaza Strip from the face of the earth’ (Goldenberg, 2024; for further record of genocidal intent see ICJ, 2024).

Crisis conditions are therefore not natural, nor are they incidental consequences of conflict, but actively produced through Israel’s blockade, bombardment, displacement, detention, torture and siege, as well as through the direct targeting of humanitarian infrastructure (ICJ, 2024; HRW, 2024a; Al-Haq, 2025; OHCHR, 2025; UN News, 2025).

Some examples around the intentionality of the crises include:

- **Famine:** not driven by environmental or economic scarcity but by siege, blockade and, as Oxfam states, ‘Israel’s use of starvation as a weapon of war’ (Oxfam, 2025a; WFP, 2025), with the systematic destruction of agricultural infrastructure severe enough to earn the designation ‘ecocide’ (Hamouchène, 2024; White, 2025).
- Lack of **shelter** is not a byproduct of war, but is due to Israel’s widespread destruction of Palestinian homes, so intense and intentional, it has been called ‘domicide’ (OHCHR, 2026a).
- Gaza’s **public health** crisis is exacerbated as a result of its health care system being systematically dismantled through the repeated targeting of hospitals, ambulances, supply chains and medical personnel (Gaza Health Cluster, 2024; OHCHR, 2025; UN News, 2025), as well as destruction of water and sanitation infrastructure (HRW, 2024b; MSF, 2026; Mahmoud, 2026).
- Palestinian **education** has been subjected to what international observers term ‘scholasticide’ (Alarabed, 2025): universities, schools and archives destroyed at extraordinary scale, with academics and teachers killed or displaced (OHCHR, 2024a).
- **Aid** infrastructure has been systematically destroyed and targeted. It is not just physical infrastructure, as aid workers are routinely killed or detained, and humanitarian agencies’ funding frozen (Stoddard et al., 2025; INSO, 2025). As an international NGO (INGO) interviewee explained: ‘The point is not only to stop aid. The point is to make operating so difficult that people eventually give up.’ (See also Al-Haq, 2025.)

Israel furthers colonial objectives of ‘erasure’ through use of the aid sector. The weaponisation of aid for physical erasure and cultural erasure can be seen through using food aid as a means for forced displacement. As Israel sought to displace Palestinians from northern Gaza through evacuation orders and military operations, humanitarian actors faced growing pressure to concentrate assistance in southern Gaza, raising concerns that aid delivery was becoming entangled in broader displacement strategies (OCHA, 2023; HRW, 2023). It created a coercive choice: to relocate or face heightened deprivation (Mada Masr, 2025).

Palestinian interviewees also highlighted Israel’s scholasticide as not just an attempt to eradicate Palestine’s current and future thinkers and leaders, but also part of the attempts to erode collective memory and the possibility of future self-determination. Interviewees argued that some aid agencies have become entangled with this agenda, with reports of new education initiatives that suppress

Palestinian political expression, discourage symbols/songs, and/or replace Palestinian curricula/identity frameworks, often under the language of ‘neutrality’, ‘de-radicalisation’, or ‘peace education’ (Tress, 2023). Interviewees highlighted that these trends were most observable in newly registered, and highly dubious, ‘humanitarian’ actors, and amongst some equally questionable ‘mutual aid’ groups and organisations who operate outside traditional humanitarian systems (explored later in this chapter).

2.2 Profiteering from the war economy

The humanitarian catastrophe in Palestine cannot be understood separately from the political economy sustaining it (Hanieh, 2013). Under IHL, the occupying power bears primary responsibility for ensuring the welfare of the occupied population, including the provision of food, medical supplies, public health and the maintenance of civil life (Hague Regulations, 1907, Article 43; Fourth Geneva Convention, 1949, Articles 55–56). However, as Tartir (2021) argues, international humanitarian and development systems, donors and aid agencies have effectively absorbed the costs of occupation, subsidising and managing its consequences while at times further bolstering its oppressive and discriminatory structures (explored further in Section 2.3 on humanitarian camouflage).

The structures of the occupation not only try to utilise international humanitarian and development aid to reduce the financial cost of oppression, but also structure oppression in ways to generate profit. Palestinian economic life has long been subordinated to Israeli control, creating what Samir Amin termed ‘dependent reproduction’: a condition where Palestinians remain reliant on external transfers while structural causes of dependency remain untouched (Amin, 1990). This dependency has been actively produced through policies including de-development (Amin, 1976), the decades-long blockade of the Gaza Strip (UNCTAD, 2015), restrictions on movement, constraints on Palestinian businesses and investment (UNCTAD, 2023), recurrent destruction of agricultural infrastructure and farmland, and severe limitations on exports (UN General Assembly, 2022; World Bank, 2024). For example, UNCTAD (2022) estimates that restrictions in Area C alone (61% of the West Bank) cost the Palestinian economy US\$ billions annually (also see World Bank, 2014).

Under siege, this intensifies dramatically. The starkest culmination is what UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese terms the ‘economy of genocide’: private companies, military suppliers (Hammouri, 2026), logistics firms, surveillance corporations and politically connected intermediaries profit from destruction, displacement and prolonged catastrophe (Albanese, 2025). During interviews, one international academic put it bluntly: ‘There is an entire economy built around Gaza’s destruction.’

One concrete example of this can be found in the Mada Masr investigation, *Kings of famine*, published in December 2025, which documented systematic corruption, exploitation and profiteering from suffering. The report highlights how funds for ‘coordinating’ goods into Gaza over two years exceeded \$1 billion. The private company ‘Sons of Sinai’ reportedly charged \$3,000–\$5,000 per truck and security actors inside Gaza reportedly charged up to \$30,000 per truck. Coordinating a single frozen chicken truck cost up to \$200,000, with the meat sold at \$40 per kilogram, generating up to \$1 million per shipment (Mada Masr, 2025). Basic goods prices rose over 1,000% (WFP, 2024).

Interviewees stressed this is qualitatively different from ordinary humanitarian profiteering: scarcity is deliberately produced, controlled and monetised through the structures of occupation and siege. The investigation is explicit about Israel's direct role through restrictive supplier lists, bureaucratic restrictions and military support for gangs looting aid on arrival (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2025; Palestine Centre for Human Rights, 2025; van der Merwe and Doak, 2025; Mada Masr, 2025).

The humanitarian sector is further entangled, as there are global humanitarian partnerships with private sector parties to the conflict (Mason, 2024). The World Food Programme (WFP) and Palantir Technologies partnership illustrates this dynamic. WFP maintained a major partnership with Palantir, while Palantir simultaneously signed agreements for 'war-related missions' with Israel's Ministry of Defence (Parker, 2019; Newman, 2024). Palantir executives described their products as 'optimising the kill chain' (Dupraz-Dobias, 2025). Francesca Albanese later characterised Palantir's role in the US-led Civil-Military Coordination Center² (CMCC) as part of 'a profit-driven parallel system' linked to unlawful conduct (in Whittall, 2026). The former head of OCHA in Palestine, Jonathan Whittall, described this relationship as 'creating a situation in which the delivery of aid is taking a backseat to the pursuit of profit, investment, and the training of AI products' (Whittall, 2026).

Treating such partnerships as apolitical necessities not only contributes to the war economy, it also entangles aid actors with those furthering human suffering. This compromises independence, while further eroding trust in the formal humanitarian system.

2.3 Weaponising humanitarian action as humanitarian camouflage

Israel has worked actively both to dismantle the humanitarian system by attacking its legitimacy, infrastructure and norms (see HRW, 2024c; Women Journalists without Chains, 2026), and to instrumentalise it for military and political objectives. This section examines how Israel tries to co-opt humanitarian action and actors to such ends.

Where erasure removes, camouflage conceals. Francesca Albanese describes the deployment of humanitarian language and presence to obscure systematic violations as 'humanitarian camouflage' (Daniele et al., 2024). A Palestinian human rights interviewee elaborated: 'Aid is used as a way to remove pressure from Israel, to make it appear as though they are fulfilling their international legal obligations when they are not.' This operates through several interconnected means.

² The CMCC was established by US Central Command in Kiryat Gat, southern Israel, in October 2025 as part of US President Donald Trump's Gaza peace plan, tasked with coordinating humanitarian aid delivery and ceasefire monitoring. Dozens of countries sent military and diplomatic personnel, and humanitarian organisations were expected to coordinate aid operations through the centre. Palantir holds a permanent desk at the CMCC, providing the AI architecture for tracking aid flows into Gaza.

2.3.1 Weaponising humanitarian language

Israel has consistently deployed the language of humanitarian protection, such as ‘safe zones’, ‘evacuation corridors’ and ‘humanitarian pauses’ to provide legal and reputational cover for military operations and forced displacement. Areas such as Jabalia, Khan Younis, Rafah and Al-Mawasi were repeatedly reclassified as ‘safe’ before being subjected to military bombardment or further evacuation orders (McKernan and Ellis-Petersen, 2025).

2.3.2 COGAT as control, not coordination

Under IHL, civilian populations have a right to receive humanitarian assistance, and parties to a conflict have an obligation to allow and facilitate it (Epshtain, 2025), not to position themselves as its gatekeeper. Yet the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), an Israeli military body, decides every permit, import approval, staff registration, convoy clearance and communications licence for humanitarian operations in Gaza and the West Bank (HRW, 2024c). Such architecture, under the guise of ‘coordination’, places the occupying military power between a besieged population and the aid agencies trying to reach them.

In practice, interviewees consistently described COGAT not as a facilitation mechanism but one of control. Approvals are delayed arbitrarily, regulations shift without notice and organisations perceived as critical of Israel face obstruction (Al-Haq, 2024; OCHA, 2025). Palestinian legal scholars and human rights advocates argue that Israel instrumentalises legal and humanitarian frameworks, using bureaucracy, access restrictions and humanitarian necessity as mechanisms of political control and leverage (Hammouri, 2026; Renaissance Strategic Center, 2026). The result is a system in which Israel simultaneously restricts aid and presents itself as the body enabling it. Israel can point to coordination infrastructure as evidence of compliance with its humanitarian obligations while that same infrastructure functions as a chokepoint.

2.3.3 Replacing principled actors with compliant ones

In March 2025, Israel introduced sweeping NGO registration requirements mandating that international organisations submit the personal data of all Palestinian staff, including names, identification numbers and home addresses, to Israeli authorities (MSF, 2025; Sparks, 2025). Registration could be refused for NGOs ‘delegitimising’ Israel or supporting boycotts (Oxfam, 2025b). Most major international NGOs (INGOs) refused to comply. Subsequently, on 30 December 2025, 37 international humanitarian organisations were notified that their registrations had expired (Al Jazeera, 2025). These INGOs delivered over half of all food assistance in Gaza, supported 60% of field hospitals and carried out nearly three-quarters of all shelter activities (NRC, 2026). Médecins Sans Frontières described the requirements as a ‘cynical and calculated attempt’ at political control (Fletcher, 2026).

Simultaneously, new opaque actors, have been authorised to scale up their work, most notably the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF – further details in Subsection 2.3.4). These ‘new’ humanitarian actors are often deeply entangled with Israeli political goals and objectives (Sparks, 2026). ‘Aid in Gaza has been stripped to bare survival and its future delivery appears to be [...] profit driven and militarized’ (aid worker quote in Whittall, 2026).

The effect is that Israel can point to a growing roster of registered ‘humanitarian’ organisations while systematically excluding those capable of independently bearing witness, including documenting war crimes and speaking out against injustices. This produces a ‘curated humanitarian space’: approved organisations operating under constraints that limit dissent and shape reporting, while principled organisations are frozen out (Sparks, 2026). As one aid worker summarised, Israeli authorities ‘get to fulfil the obligations and the optics of the humanitarian response without giving access to the NGOs they don’t like’ (ibid.).

2.3.4 The extremes of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation

The GHF exemplifies the endpoint of this logic: the replacement of principled, independent humanitarian actors with a privatised, militarised, politically aligned substitute. The GHF was conceived in late 2023 at private meetings between Israeli officials, military figures, private security actors and businesspeople closely connected to the Israeli government, with the aim of creating an alternative aid distribution system outside traditional humanitarian channels (Times of Israel, 2025a; Nicols and Farge, 2025). The Israeli government transferred hundreds of millions of dollars to fund the GHF. The GHF then partnered with a private security firm owned by a former senior Central Intelligence Agency officer to oversee logistics and access routes (Perez, 2025; Times of Israel, 2025b). It required Palestinians to cross the Israeli military line to reach distribution sites, conditions other humanitarian organisations would not accept. INGOs, Palestinian NGOs, UN experts and humanitarian donors united in their call for GHF to be dismantled (Joint Statement, 2025), describing it as a ‘disturbing example’ of humanitarian aid being exploited for military and geopolitical agendas in violation of international law. At least 2,300 Palestinians were reportedly killed while seeking food in the three months following its establishment, including over 1,000 at or near GHF sites (Rapaport, 2025).

The dangers here are not incidental, they are inherent to what the GHF represents. The International NGO Safety Organisation has warned that private logistics providers lack the training, trust and principled framework to operate safely in conflict environments. Militarised aid sites increase risk, undermine community trust and expose NGOs to greater violence (INSO, 2025). When aid is stripped of independence, impartiality and accountability, to instead be delivered through military-adjacent contractors, it ceases to function as humanitarian assistance in any meaningful sense. It becomes a tool of political and military management. Despite this, some donors reportedly questioned calls to boycott GHF initially, citing claimed lower costs, as one international humanitarian interviewee explained: ‘One donor asked me why GHF should be opposed when they are cheaper than INGOs.’ Although this donor eventually joined the boycott, the hesitation reflects a dangerous, broader trend: reducing humanitarian action to logistics, detached from principles and accountability.

2.4 Racialised hierarchies and solidarity obligations

Settler colonialism is fundamentally structured through racialised hierarchies that distinguish between lives deemed valuable and those rendered disposable. Colonial projects have historically depended upon constructing the colonised population as inferior, dangerous or less fully human to justify dispossession, domination and violence (Fanon, 1961; Wolfe, 2006). Palestinian life is systematically devalued by Israel through administrative detention without trial, including torture and sexual violence against Palestinian detainees (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2024), military courts for Palestinians alongside civilian courts for Israelis (HRW, 2024c); military detention of Palestinian children; a recently legislated death penalty by hanging applicable exclusively to Palestinians (Bedard, 2026); and over 7,000 Palestinians held in administrative detention without trial (B'Tselem, n.d.). The devaluation of Palestinian life is codified, systematic and structural.

This systematised subjugation can be reinforced by a humanitarian system that mirrors the occupation's hierarchy of life. The sector's complicity is not reducible to the restrictions imposed upon it; it also emerges through internal practices of exclusion and unequal valuation – who is heard, who is protected, who sets the rules and who is treated as authoritative.

At an inter-agency level, Palestinian organisations, particularly those based in Gaza, complained of exclusion from higher-level coordination and decision-making structures (often based in Jerusalem) and from COGAT-led logistical coordination. Interviewees did, however, note improvements in accessibility for the wider UN-led coordination infrastructure, particularly following shifts towards area-based coordination.

Within international organisations, Palestinian interviewees highlighted the injustices of how Palestinian and international staff are often treated differently in salary, security, decision-making power and duty of care. International staff may be evacuated or shifted to remote work while Palestinian colleagues absorb the greatest risk, with some denied remote work opportunities even after fleeing Gaza and instead having their contracts terminated (Certioraris, 2024). When 'duty of care' was highlighted as a motivating factor to move operations to southern Gaza, Palestinian interviewees asked, 'Duty of care towards who? Are we not also staff deserving of care?' As one interviewee stated: 'The humanitarian system reproduces the same hierarchy of whose life is seen as valuable.'

Palestinian exclusion from decision-making spaces (within the inter-agency humanitarian system and within international humanitarian organisations) is an ethical failure, and it also weakens humanitarian response by eroding institutional memory and marginalising the Palestinian expertise essential to effective programming (PNGO, 2026).

Yet the same inequalities that damage the sector also create obligations. International privileges of being listened to, of holding a passport that confers protection and of having the option to leave must be consciously leveraged in solidarity.

2.5 Leveraging privilege?

International presence can matter for civilian protection and justice, but it requires active presence and solidarity. One interviewee recalled a call with Israeli authorities following an incident in which Palestinian colleagues were killed. The first question asked was whether any international staff had been harmed. Once it was established that international staff were unaffected, the urgency of the Israeli authority's response sharply declined. The interviewee believed that had international employees been there, the response would have been dramatically different.

The incident illustrates how international proximity can create, however inequitably, a degree of protection for Palestinian life, a harsh reality leveraged by the International Solidarity Movement and similar accompaniment movements. It is also evident when many Palestinians seek shelter near international infrastructure as a space that seems safer. This is also why the question of who stays and who leaves is never purely operational. However, not all 'presence' is equal. Presence devoid of humanitarian principles and without active solidarity is not neutral but actively harmful (as illustrated in the analysis on humanitarian camouflage in Section 2.3). The type of presence called for is more like that of Oxfam, which collaborated with Al-Haq and the Global Legal Action Network, providing evidence of IHL violations during international litigation efforts (Oxfam, 2024).

Solidarity-based international presence also matters for bearing witness. With international journalists and human rights monitors severely restricted, humanitarian actors are often among the last remaining international witnesses capable of documenting conditions and challenging Israeli misinformation campaigns. As one Palestinian director reflected:

It is unfair, but the reality is they [international staff] are listened to and trusted more than us. You need to visit Palestine to understand the realities of living here. No amount of reading will help – but as soon as you come you will see how relentless it is. Then you will understand.

Another Palestinian director similarly emphasised:

As Palestinian academics and investigators, we are subject to such intense delegitimisation campaigns. International names are important for credibility with foreigners; they must elevate Palestinian research and work.

Interviewees also highlighted the potential value of international presence in providing technical and programmatic support following the destruction and displacement of much of Gaza's professional and academic class. However, they stressed this must occur without dominating, patronising or replacing Palestinian expertise and leadership.

Israel has worked deliberately to make solidarity-based physical presence feel impossible (Al-Shabaka, 2025) – through extreme violence, bureaucratic suffocation and registration systems designed to force alignment. Interviewees described intense internal debates as organisations weighed deeper co-option

into Israeli objectives against the risks of losing access altogether. Several warned of a ‘slippery slope’ in which concessions made to maintain access generate further demands and ever-lower thresholds for acceptable compromise. As one interviewee observed: ‘Israel is constantly shifting the goalposts.’

One example repeatedly raised by interviewees was the decision by many international agencies to withdraw from North Gaza. Palestinian interviewees described deep feelings of abandonment. Interviewees also argued that more could have been done to utilise proximity to power, particularly by organisations headquartered in countries allied to Israel, to push harder for visas, access and adherence to deconfliction mechanisms. As one Palestinian humanitarian actor asked:

The UK, US and Europe are all Israel’s allies. They fund and provide military support to Israel and therefore do have leverage. Why was that leverage not used to push for at least their citizens to have visas? Have access? And be protected by deconfliction (in the North of Gaza)?

At the same time, interviewees recognised that decisions to withdraw were shaped by Israel’s success in making operations appear increasingly untenable. However, many argued that conceding space failed to preserve humanitarian access in the long term, as organisations continued to face targeting and restrictions regardless. Several participants therefore stressed the need for collective rather than bilateral resistance to Israeli restrictions. The false choice between principled solidarity and humanitarian access must therefore be collectively named and opposed. While bilateral negotiations may once have provided some operational value, one interviewee argued that ‘all meaningful red lines have now been crossed’.

2.6 Pursuing liberation: solidarity and *sumud*

Humanitarian problems cannot be fixed with humanitarian solutions. Ending the occupation, ensuring accountability and protecting Palestinian rights are political imperatives. Humanitarian action cannot replace human rights work, journalism or legal accountability, but humanitarian actors must actively advocate for the protection, operating space and resourcing of these sibling sectors.

Despite extraordinary violence and destruction, Palestinian communities continue to sustain powerful forms of collective care, resistance and survival. Palestinian culture emphasises the importance of *sumud*, broadly translatable as ‘steadfastness’, not as passive endurance but as an active collective form of resistance. It is the determination to remain, to sustain life and to resist erasure in culture, history and spirit, grounded in dignity, remembrance and collective survival (Tartir et al., 2025). Across Palestine, neighbourhood initiatives, municipalities, healthcare workers, journalists, educators, women’s groups, mutual aid networks and civil society organisations continue to sustain life under conditions intentionally designed to produce collapse (Assali and Garbett, 2024; PNGO, 2024; Tartir et al., 2025). These actions and actors are fundamental to humanity and must inform the operations and ethos of the humanitarian system and actors.

Palestinian human rights organisations, activists and unions have refused to accept the logic of their own erasure. Al-Haq, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights and the Al Mezan Center for Human Rights continue documenting violations even as their offices are bombed (Tartir et al., 2025), their teams repressed (Al-Shabaka, 2025) and their organisations sanctioned.³ The Union of Agricultural Work Committees supports farmers facing forced displacement despite the union facing criminalisation (OHCHR, 2025). Palestinian journalists have borne extraordinary personal risk to document the genocide in real time, resisting disinformation and erasure. Cultural workers and writers, from the late Refaat Alareer to the contributors to the comprehensive *Sumud* anthology (see Halasa and Elgrably, 2025), have insisted on the survival of Palestinian memory and identity as acts of political resistance (Tricontinental, 2025). Outside Palestine, various acts of solidarity – aid flotillas (Seckin, 2026; Global Sumud Flotilla, 2026), dock workers refusing the transit of fuel and weapons (Ziadah and Fox-Hodess, 2025), civilian direct action against weapons infrastructure (Al Jazeera, 2026b), mass consumer boycotts and young Israelis refusing to join the military on conscientious grounds (Amnesty International, 2025) – have transformed *sumud* into a transnational steadfast refusal. As one interviewee reflected: ‘If speaking out changed nothing, there would not be such intense efforts to silence people.’

As Palestinians resist the world’s most powerful states and corporations to continue to exist, the humanitarian sector faces a choice: resist the erasure of its own principles, or allow the ‘humanitarian soul’ to be further hollowed out and reduced to profit-seeking and military interests. Many international interviewees lamented the relentlessness of Israel’s attacks aimed at wearing them down, burning them out, and achieving collaboration or withdrawal. However, there is also a growing call from some within the humanitarian sector to stand strong with its principles, strive to move with integrity and embody *sumud* by not giving up (Khalidi and Issa, 2026). Palestinian organisations continue to sustain life and resistance under unimaginable conditions. The task now is to build alongside them with clarity, courage and ‘radical, unapologetic solidarity’ (ibid.).

3 These organisations were sanctioned by the US, for being ‘directly engaged in efforts by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate, arrest, detain, or prosecute Israeli nationals, without Israel’s consent’ (Al-Haq, 2025; US Department of State, 2025).

3 Myanmar: from military oppression to feminist humanitarianism

Since the February 2021 military coup, Myanmar has been grappling with a continually escalating political, economic and humanitarian crisis. The sham elections that were held in late 2025 and early 2026 under the supervision of Myanmar's military are unlikely to bring any relief to the situation. The coup's chief architect Min Aung Hlaing now claims the position of President via a junta-backed parliamentary process that has widely been described as fraudulent (OHCHR, 2026b). Instead, the country faces interconnected 'polycrises', with the military's ongoing attacks and air strikes on civilian populations forcibly displacing millions, triggering economic collapse and causing widespread food insecurity (UNDP, 2025). Natural hazards, such as recurring cyclones and a devastating 2025 earthquake, have further magnified the acute needs of tens of millions of people who have been pushed into poverty, with half of the population of about 64 million now living below the poverty line (UNDP, 2024) and 16.2 million needing humanitarian assistance (OCHA, n.d.). Other environmental challenges have also intensified, with rapid deforestation, mining and climate shocks further threatening communities and livelihoods as Myanmar's opaque extractive industries gain momentum amid rampant and unaccountable resource extraction (Fishbein and Naw, 2025; Roi, 2026).

Considering the military's recent attempt to rebrand itself as a civilian government, there is growing apprehension among Myanmar communities as to how the international humanitarian sector will respond. Communities fear a compromise in which international actors will be more willing to participate with a new state authority without properly addressing and holding the military accountable for a litany of abuses committed against the population since the coup. The 'new' political structure also remains firmly under military control. The seeming inability of international mechanisms to hold the Myanmar military accountable for decades of human rights abuses, including genocide and war crimes, has helped fuel a culture of impunity among the military and their elites (Maung, 2023). Given these circumstances, the erosion of trust among Myanmar's people and its central state governance system has only worsened. The military's coup and related actions are the catalyst for the current situation but Myanmar's polycrises cannot be attributed solely to the coup. Rather, and as seen with Palestine (and Sudan in Chapter 4), these crises reflect deeper structural dynamics rooted in colonial histories and sustained through global systems that privilege economic interests to the detriment of justice, human rights and accountability.

This chapter considers how the interconnected systems of colonialism and capitalism have fuelled conflict dynamics and are central dimensions of oppression in Myanmar. It also posits how the humanitarian sector can play a meaningful role in alleviating harm by embracing a more holistic humanitarian approach that focuses on supporting and bolstering Myanmar's diverse civil society movements, particularly feminist humanitarianism.

3.1 From colonial legacies to contemporary oppression

Myanmar has experienced decades of conflict and repressive rule under a military regime, ever since it gained independence from the British empire in 1948 (Council of Foreign Relations, 2026). Today, it exemplifies how colonial structures have not disappeared, they are instead represented by the military and other military-aligned actors who continue to exploit the country's natural resources. This occurs under a paternalistic framework that serves to enrich the military and connected elites, while much of the population suffers under the hardship of constant conflict, exacerbated by entrenched extractivist war economies.

Myanmar's military was created during the colonial period to stifle dissent, as it fought wars domestically as well as threats to the nation (Callahan, 2004). Since independence, the military has adopted the colonial practice of divide and conquer, working to establish the dominant ethnic Bamar language and culture, and Buddhist religion, across what is a highly heterogeneous country in terms of ethnicities, languages and religions. This has fuelled brutal, protracted wars as many opposing ethnic resistance organisations (EROs) battle to establish their own sovereignty and self-determination (Naw et al., 2025).

Like the Israeli state, the military's decades-old and brutal 'four cuts' strategy has been forthright in its complete disregard for civilians. The armed forces deliberately block aid, destroy food and aid items, and maintain control of areas by isolating and terrorising the civilian population (HRW, 2023). This strategy, that aims to starve resistance networks of support and intelligence, is a recognised form of collective punishment that is frequently combined with sexual violence and repression, where rape is used as a tool of war (Fishbein and Nu Nu Lusan, 2021). This is evident not just in the military's 2016–2017 genocide against the Rohingya, but also across the country, particularly in areas controlled or contested by resistance actors. The military's violent tactics, fuelled by an undercurrent of male domination and female subordination, have infiltrated into societal norms, presenting broader challenges to women's rights and gender equity across political and cultural spheres.

Against this backdrop of oppression, Myanmar's current political economy, in a downward spiral following the coup, further complicates prospects for peace. Natural resources including timber, gemstones and rare earth minerals continue to finance armed groups operating within resistance-controlled or -contested territories, reducing incentives to pursue negotiated settlements (Ratcliffe, 2023). In 2015, a report exposed Myanmar's opaque jade trade, controlled by military elites and drug lords, and worth up to \$31 billion – nearly half the country's total gross domestic product (GDP) (Global Witness, 2015). By 2021 and in the aftermath of the coup, Myanmar's jade-mining regions, located in Kachin State, saw an increase in fighting between the military and the ethnic Kachin Independence Army (KIA). Under the cover of heightened conflict, smuggling is rampant, with an estimated 90% of all jade being taken out of the country to China, and without being formally declared (Global Witness, 2021).

It is widely recognised that numerous armed actors including the KIA and its political wing, the Kachin Independence Organisation, are also involved in resource extraction, with sales helping to finance the illicit arms trade. However, EROs operating from their respective territories are viewed with far more legitimacy than the Myanmar military among local populations. Although not homogeneous, many EROs have existed for decades, with formal political systems, ministries and wide-ranging policies that deliver services such as education and healthcare in lieu of a national system (Naw et al., 2025). In the case of ethnic groups such as the Kachin that have multiple languages and are predominantly Christian, the delivery of services that are carried out are also a form of resistance against the military's efforts to impose a racialised hierarchy of language, culture and religion. While many EROs, particularly those with more militaristic and authoritarian characteristics, face a variety of criticisms, they tend to be more trusted by local groups that have cultural, linguistic and religious ties with them (ibid.).

Myanmar's illicit sectors continue to generate significant revenue streams for both the military and other armed actors, reinforcing incentives to sustain, rather than resolve, conflict. There have been stilted attempts to punish the military's role in the coup, with some international sanctions targeted at resources such as timber and gemstones. However, these appear to be unevenly enforced, particularly in sectors linked to transnational supply chains (especially rare earth and critical minerals), and the continued provision of dual-use goods serves to illustrate these contradictions (Amnesty International, 2026). Aviation fuel, aircraft components, and other materials with both civilian and military applications have continued to enter Myanmar, despite widespread acknowledgement that such resources are being used to facilitate air strikes against civilian populations and to transport military personnel into active conflict zones (Amnesty International, 2022b). Illicit money flows have also reportedly been received by the junta even as some countries began restricting the military's use of international banks to make arms purchases (OHCHR, 2024b).

On a broader scale, Myanmar's economic fallout has far-reaching implications. A 2025 report argues that a new crisis is emerging amid the dynamics of the post-coup conflict, in which rampant human trafficking and cyber-scam centres have grown in scale and impact globally, resulting in a 'humanitarian catastrophe' affecting an estimated 200,000 people trafficked into forced labour (Ruser, 2025). Rather than demanding a political response, the author of the report argues how a comprehensive strategy is required, including a stronger humanitarian response to support the survivors of trafficking and forced labour, as well as to prevent any further trade in human beings. However, such a humanitarian emphasis may serve to take attention away from the underlying political economy and only serve as yet another superficial solution for deep-rooted systems of exploitation. As human capital is systematically eroded, it is evident that predatory capitalism in Myanmar operates not as a neutral economic system but as a set of relations that both shape and are shaped by conflict. This system enables the continuation of exploitative practices while evading any meaningful accountability.

3.2 Techno-humanitarianism meets popular revolution

The first six months following the 2021 coup was a pivotal time in which humanitarians could have more widely, and publicly, engaged with local resistance actors to help achieve their aspirations of ending military rule. Instead, many international actors remained committed to a strict interpretation of neutrality, insisting on its necessity to either gain or maintain access through the junta. This international position, however, was incongruent with the military's manipulation of humanitarian access, which was systematically denied across much of the country for decades prior to the coup (Fortify Rights, 2018). As in Palestine, the concern is not just about access, but also how aid agencies can be co-opted to become part of the systems of oppression. For Myanmar, the starkest example has been the Rohingya being confined to camps that are essentially open-air prisons since 2011, with aid agencies entrenched as service providers. There are parallels with Palestine, where this presence has done nothing to prevent genocide.

An international insistence on negotiating with a military that had stolen away the credible votes of millions of people for a democratically elected government risked not only normalising engagement with the junta, but also complicity (Kamal and Benowitz, 2022). The emphasis on depoliticising interpretations of neutrality placed many international institutions at odds with the revolutionary spirit of localised humanitarian resistance and failed to recognise a very real opportunity to engage in transformative humanitarianism that was far more dynamic and agile (see Slim, 2022). It should be recognised that there were many donors who enabled a swathe of emergency and flexible funding responses after the coup, but the bulk of international actors simply did not understand how to engage with the pluralistic nature of the resistance (Naw et al., 2025). Consequently, Myanmar actors, from grassroots mutual aid to long-established resistance governments, have grown more suspicious of humanitarian bureaucracies, and international agencies are viewed as repeatedly promoting their own priorities and vested interests above the needs of local populations (Slim, 2023).

3.3 Humanitarian dynamism: women's mutual aid leadership

In the absence of a legitimate and functional central government, Myanmar's diverse actors opposing the junta have organically evolved into dynamic resistance groups. Mutual aid networks have become core to crisis response, regardless of any international presence. While gaining more traction since the coup, such response networks have an extensive history in the country (see Fink, 2001). Throughout decades of brutal military dictatorship, Myanmar's civil society and EROs continually expanded despite the repressive regimes that attempted to constrain them. Since the coup, Myanmar is moving towards a pluralistic state with a diversity of civil, political and armed resistance actors creating a new, legitimate, federal democratic state that seeks to be free from the military's stranglehold (Naw et al., 2025). It is within this space that international actors can consider how to support the existing local systems that have endured, and to provide scaffolding or bolster the naturally care-driven – and often feminist – humanitarian responses that are happening on the ground.

Women-led responses to justice and equality within the local humanitarian responses in Myanmar are long-standing, particularly given widespread gender-based violence that occurs through the male-dominated and violent structure of the military state. Women's rights, refugee-led and women-led organisations within and neighbouring Myanmar have provided unique leadership among mutual aid networks, offering a contrast to a military institution that is associated with repression, violence and exploitation. These organisations, aligned with feminist humanitarian principles, have also provided compelling alternatives to combat the colonial hierarchies that persist across Myanmar society, by delivering a humanitarian response that is care-centred and conflict-sensitive while being grounded in equality and justice (Feminist Humanitarian Network, n.d.; Maung et al., 2025). Frontline women responders in Myanmar interviewed for this report described how, on top of their humanitarian and aid work, they also carried out gender-education programmes to help reshape social relations away from machismo violence. Youth education on gender-based violence, gendered aspects of conflict and women's rights in general is also helping raise awareness among younger generations.

Women are central to the mutual aid networks in Myanmar, delivering urgent humanitarian services in hard-to-reach areas and in cross-border contexts as first responders and crisis-response leaders. Their organisations are diverse, ranging from smaller, grassroots organisations to more established national and regional entities that may focus on different themes and issues. Yet their mission and goals share an intersectional approach that first considers the needs and priorities of their communities, rather than the predetermined approach of international humanitarian actors (Mazzilli et al., 2025). However, they continue to grapple with the constraints of the formal aid system.

3.4 Concerning international aid and political engagement

Many of the civil society actors interviewed for this report highlighted a 'box-ticking' culture among international actors that failed to understand the high-risk security environment faced by frontline humanitarians and human rights groups operating under the radar inside Myanmar, or in cross-border areas (see Décobert et al., 2025). Many donors are still requesting receipts or declarations for aid delivery to specific locations, stipulating the requirement for signatures and personally identifiable information such as photocopies of identity documents or passport numbers, despite security forces targeting civil society and aid workers for arrest. Beyond undermining the autonomy, experience and knowledge of local partners, this box-ticking culture only entrenches the long-standing patterns of power and coloniality of the international humanitarian complex and exposes staff and communities to significant risk and harm.

Many international donors and aid agencies approach compliance as an administrative task that is mostly tied to capacity issues and have attempted to reduce the administrative burden during the peak of the crisis by introducing workarounds or reducing the extent of reporting frameworks. The authors also acknowledge that donors face accountability to taxpayers. However, a Myanmar women's rights activist further explained how, in the Myanmar context, the imposition of traditional compliance measures continued to reinforce unequal power relationships between – often Western – donors and civil society recipients. She said:

For those of us who are trying to work underground or behind the scenes, the risks are so high and there are many difficulties. Starting from them requiring receipts to even signatures – they request that we even provide our ID numbers. When you consider that we’re working under a military state that is terrorising civilians, it’s difficult for us to understand why they would ask us to risk our safety in this way [...] In reality, donor policies work in their favour.

The role of international actors in this landscape raises broader questions of accountability. The presence of UN agencies and other international organisations did little to prevent or meaningfully mitigate the Rohingya genocide, nor did it avert the subsequent military coup. Instead, as has been argued in global security studies critiques, certain conflicts including Myanmar’s protracted civil war have remained relatively marginal within international knowledge production and policy attention, reflecting uneven geopolitical priorities and institutional biases (Brenner and Han, 2022). This selective attention has material consequences, contributing to cycles of neglect that allow violence, impunity and structural inequality to persist.

The generalised weakness of international response in Myanmar (as well as in Palestine and Sudan) discussed in this report contributes to cultures of impunity in which atrocities occur. It creates a degree of complicity among all international actors, which should give them pause in how they engage – particularly in considering how the international humanitarian and aid sector are perceived and understood by the people whom they are meant to serve. As with Palestine, there are widespread concerns about how aid actors have failed to substantially prevent violence against civilians, while international presence is also criticised for legitimising the military.

Beyond international presence and the inability to prevent violence, in the context of the coup, UN agencies and many international actors have proven too rigid. Most are unable to move away from overly bureaucratic systems that could otherwise help navigate crisis response in Myanmar, particularly in contested governance areas. Instead, they appear focused on pursuing approaches that disproportionately appear to favour the junta and further widen the gulf of mistrust between resistance actors and international agencies. As in Palestine, the manipulation of humanitarian access by the oppressor has created a dynamic in which the values of international actors are routinely compromised under the rhetoric of securing ever-elusive access, with insufficient focus on accountability for the bad faith actors restricting access in the first place.

Considering these dynamics, there is a clear need to rethink humanitarian engagement in Myanmar by pursuing transformative change, both in the way international actors engage with local actors, and in terms of a humanitarian framework that is genuinely centred on elevating and restoring the human rights of affected populations. This includes diversifying funding mechanisms, aligning support with localised network responses, and recognising the inherently political nature of aid in conflict-affected settings (Veerapen et al., 2026). Without such shifts, humanitarian action risks not only failing to engage with the root causes of crisis but also inadvertently reinforcing the systems that sustain it.

3.5 Towards feminist humanitarianism

As a woman leader and activist, I see the impact of patriarchal and colonial mindsets across our work. [...] Yet, women in our community have long been leaders and vital to our resistance despite decades of conflict and underdevelopment. (Myanmar feminist leader and activist)

Women and girls are recognised as being some of the most marginalised groups in conflict and displacement settings; women from regionally diverse ethnic groups across Myanmar also have unique experience and leadership in dealing with the fallout of protracted conflict (Women's League of Burma, 2026). Within the many ethnically diverse and geographically expansive groups, women have taken the rein of humanitarian leadership, being well positioned to lead responses in all areas of humanitarian action (Maung et al., 2025). However, they are working with extremely limited resources for their work – less than 1% of ODA is designated specifically to women's rights organisations, despite recognition of their vital role in humanitarian and broader aid delivery (Left, 2025).

As reflected in crisis response globally, women across Myanmar have proven that if given the space and autonomy to lead, they play a pivotal role in delivering everything from life-saving humanitarian aid to pioneering aid leadership. The UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher has explicitly called for an increase in funding to women-led organisations, as part of the 'humanitarian reset' (OCHA, 2025). Such a call is likely in recognition that women are already leading humanitarian responses rooted in local communities, national contexts and broader civil society (Veerapen et al., 2026). They have unparalleled access, not just to hard-to-reach geographies and the most at-risk populations, but also to the diverse range of humanitarian resistance and mutual aid groups responsible for creating a new, pluralistic state in Myanmar. Their role as peace mediators, community liaisons, aid providers, translators and leaders equips them with strong understandings of intersectional approaches that can consider an organically moving resolution to crises that are less constrained by the predetermined approaches of international actors (Feminist Alchemy, 2024). Without being prescriptive, this constitutes feminist humanitarianism that has relevance beyond Myanmar.

Feminist humanitarianism encompasses a holistic approach that has proven successful in challenging and resisting the colonial hierarchies of Myanmar's military state. While feminist humanitarianism has proven effective in delivering humanitarian response, its primary stance is to challenge the paternalistic drivers of coloniality and focus on equity, justice and care. In doing so, it also provides a foundation for resistance against violence and exploitation of people and the environment. Traditional humanitarian models assume that expertise resides primarily within international institutions and technical frameworks, but feminist humanitarian values intrinsically rely on inclusionary and intersectional thinking and approaches. The humanitarian system can be transformed by breaking down exclusionary decision-making practices, moving away from hierarchical relations, including how funding streams are determined, and ensuring local actors are responsible in the design of the very funding mechanisms and humanitarian coordination systems that directly affect them (Mazzilli et al., 2025).

Beyond Myanmar, drawing on feminist principles has significant value for much-needed humanitarian sector transformation. Feminist humanitarianism is only one of an array of locally led approaches in Myanmar, including other focuses on justice, governance and rights that eschew the need to strictly observe ‘neutrality’ amid a politically charged crisis (Naw et al., 2025). As captured in the chapters in this paper on Palestine and Sudan, a reorientation of the global humanitarian architecture is about much more than technical solutions. Amidst military oppression, Myanmar offers insights on the alternatives that already exist, yet remain insufficiently supported. While others have written about Myanmar’s unique humanitarian resistance (see Slim, 2022; Kamal, 2023), this paper posits the urgency of a more ambitious agenda that does not just address the military’s violence, but also colonial and predatory capitalist violence. Myanmar’s feminist humanitarianism provides the foundations for such an agenda. And while feminist humanitarianism should be supported more broadly, the authors of this paper are not suggesting that it is a fix for all the challenges outlined. Rather, it is another solution that supports a more inclusive, pluralistic and liberating humanitarianism.

4 Sudan: extractivism, activism and aid

It's a political crisis, not humanitarian. The expectation of the United Arab Emirates and others was that after the fall of the Al-Bashir regime, they could just assert their vision on how Sudan should be. (Sudanese activist interviewee)

After more than three years since Sudan's current war erupted, the catastrophic human toll captures headlines, yet they also flatten out many nuances. The numbers are horrifying; of Sudan's population of approximately 52.6 million people, 33.7 million need humanitarian assistance, and 9.3 million people are internally displaced, with a further 4.4 million people displaced to neighbouring countries (OCHA, 2026b). Food insecurity is acute: 14 million people in Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) 3 (crisis), five million in IPC 4 (emergency) and 135,000 in IPC 5 (catastrophic) (IPC, n.d.). Numbers alone do not capture the severity of the violence, where the two main armed actors – the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – stand accused of extensive war crimes, severely limiting humanitarian access and of genocide in the case of the RSF (Center for Preventative Action, 2026). Sexual violence by armed actors is also prevalent, devastating not just individuals and families, but with the associated stigma also fracturing communities (Al-Karib, 2026). The SAF is supported by a relatively broad international coalition including Egypt and others, while the RSF is backed primarily by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Lewis, 2023).

International discourse, peaking during the war's anniversary every April, foregrounds the human tragedy and widespread humanitarian toll in Sudan, yet fails to sufficiently engage with the underlying drivers of the crisis. The lack of international effort to rein in the UAE's (and others') extremely damaging influence in Sudan, particularly owing to its extensive support for the RSF, is an especially striking example. This in turn undermines the legitimacy of the humanitarian system, as it is an inadequate response to the scale and drivers of violent conflict. Furthermore, the emphasis on humanitarian issues is contributing to depoliticisation in ways that are antithetical to Sudanese people's long-standing pursuit of peace and democracy. This chapter unpacks some of these dynamics of oppression, liberation and the intersections with humanitarian and aid systems.

4.1 Sudan's entrenched extractivism

Colonial legacies and predatory capitalism are major factors underpinning oppression in Sudan that have escalated following the outbreak of war in 2023. Key underlying dimensions include centralisation of power (a long-standing issue), use of violence and displacement to control people and territories, and rapacious resource extraction, compounded by decades of authoritarian rule. In turn, international peacemaking efforts have consistently over-simplified the nuances between national and sub-national political economy and conflict dynamics (Srinivasan, 2021). More broadly, foreign meddling and extraction have been acute challenges for Sudan, before and after independence. This is particularly

evident in economic relations, where Duffield and Stockton have argued, ‘for capitalism, rather than being contingent, violence is an active, indeed essential, economic relation’ (Duffield and Stockton, 2023: 3). This continues to shape war and oppression in Sudan.

Economic extraction and violence have long gone together in Sudan. Duffield and Stockton’s analysis highlights how predatory capitalism, for many years, has up-ended agricultural production and social relations in Sudan, as land was appropriated for livestock raising for export to meet the Gulf States’ rapidly increasing demand. Rather than war being a byproduct, they argue that predatory capitalist accumulation has created a state of permanent war, statistically highlighting how the demand for livestock is deeply intertwined with displacement patterns. ‘Coercive ranching’ and ‘militarised livestock production’ are argued to not simply be symptoms of capitalist demand, but instead by design (ibid.). They contend that humanitarian needs and the prevalence of armed conflict must be understood within this lens, if crisis drivers are to ever be coherently and sufficiently addressed. Highly sought-after gum arabic is also illustrative of how global economic demand contributes to conflict in Sudan.

The scale and severity of extraction have dramatically escalated during the current war, posing a major barrier to prospects for peace. Gold mining is the starkest example and widely recognised as driving and perpetuating armed conflict in Sudan. The RSF, SAF and other actors have deep interests in extracting and exporting gold, particularly as its value has skyrocketed in recent years. This in turn feeds weapons purchases that intensify violence and prolong the war, while vested interests along the gold export value chain become more entrenched (Soliman and Baldo, 2025). The critical importance of gold is backed by export data, where it has gone from approximately 20% of Sudan’s export value in 2023 to nearly 60% as of 2026, generating \$1.5 billion in export earnings for 2025. A staggering 99% of gold exports end up in the UAE (Okebiorun, 2026).

The UAE’s influence in Sudan is a striking example of how predatory extraction and violence are intertwined, albeit, recognising they are one amongst many external actors aggravating the war economy. The UAE is accused of backing and arming the RSF, particularly exchanging weapons for gold, but also funding mercenaries to support the RSF (Conflict Insights Group, 2026); although the SAF is similarly enmeshed in the gold and weapons trade. A leaked UN report documented how weapons are allegedly flown into Chad and then reach the RSF (Townsend, 2025), alongside other routes, with evidence being brought to light in the first months of the war in 2023 (Walsh et al., 2023). The UAE’s support for the RSF has attracted significant criticism for fuelling the war, particularly considering the RSF’s atrocities in El Fasher in 2025 that were widely seen as genocidal (Woldemichael, 2026). The SAF has subsequently brought a case to the International Court of Justice against the UAE for its ‘complicity in genocide’ (Mishra, 2025). The UAE denies all the allegations. Notably, it also stands accused of fuelling secessionist movements and armed conflict across the region, such as in Libya and Somalia (Krieg, 2025).

The UAE is not alone in its interference and exacerbating armed conflict in Sudan, where Egypt, Saudi Arabia and others are backing the SAF. The SAF also faces accusations of war crimes and breaches of IHL (Center for Preventative Action, 2026). However, as the primary supporter of the RSF and reaping the benefits of gold extraction, the UAE's involvement is particularly egregious. Even so, it faces few tangible repercussions, as a diplomat remarked for *The Guardian* in the lead-up to a Sudan-focused conference in 2025: 'The UK needs to explain how it is responding to massacres of children and aid workers while hosting the UAE at its London conference' (Townsend, 2025).

Despite widespread acknowledgement and evidence that the UAE is aggravating the war in Sudan, it faces minimal constraints, even though it has been arming a group accused of genocide. Owing to its oil production and vast wealth, including approximately \$2.7 trillion in sovereign wealth funds (Dangoor et al., 2026), the UAE holds significant leverage against widespread sanctions (beyond individuals) or other punitive measures. Its promise of \$1.4 trillion of investments over a decade in the US (Holland and Maccioni, 2025) is perhaps the most striking example of its potential influence. The closing of the Strait of Hormuz and the resulting fuel crisis has further heightened the UAE's bargaining power as a supplier of fuel and related products that countries around the world are scrambling for (although the UAE faces its own significant economic challenges with the Strait's closure). Conversely, other countries also have considerable leverage over the UAE, particularly in relation to trade and technology (US weapons and semiconductors most significantly), but such influence remains to be sufficiently deployed, as also seen with the lack of accountability for Israel in Chapter 2. This was even the case with the former Biden administration; a US-UAE bilateral meeting in September 2024 engendered the following analysis:

The White House whitewashes the United Arab Emirates' role in the world's worst humanitarian crisis [...] Why make Washington party to the UAE's grotesque charade with a statement that suggests we are aligned partners for peace? (Gavin, 2024)

4.2 A humanitarian system of international distraction?

Against such powerful interests, what are the implications and relevance for the humanitarian system? As captured in Chapter 2, there are dimensions of 'humanitarian camouflage', but in a different sense to what is occurring in Palestine. In Sudan, the camouflage, or distraction, relates to how the country is consistently framed as a humanitarian crisis and thus supported to meet narrowly defined humanitarian needs. This obfuscates a focus on the deeper structural drivers of the crisis. For example, funding pledges routinely attract significant attention, such as over \$1.7 billion pledged at a conference in Berlin in 2026. The funding is much needed to alleviate human suffering, while the UN called for peace and an end to the flow of weapons at the conference. There were even protests against the UAE and its support for the RSF (Townsend, 2026). However, there has been no sustained or sufficient effort to address the role of the UAE and other states in fuelling conflict, nor to address the underlying elements of predatory capitalism.

Juxtaposing the lack of Western political will towards Sudan (and Myanmar and Palestine) compared with Ukraine is particularly stark, as it illustrates that bold, economically costly action is possible. It also reinforces how Western geopolitical imperatives shape humanitarian approaches. This backs up critiques that Sudan is treated through a colonial lens of disregard that renders the formal humanitarian system a deeply inadequate international response to the scale of the crisis. As one Sudanese activist interviewee explained:

It reflects the sheer indifference of the international community. It's OK for Sudanese to be killed as long as other priorities are fulfilled. All interventions now are extremely messy and disregard the context.

Considering the scale of challenges, the authors recognise that the international humanitarian system and its actors are severely constrained in what they can influence and achieve. However, there remain significant implications for humanitarians. Foremost is the need to minimise how humanitarian framing and response to the crisis distorts attention away from the root causes of the war. A problematic aid political economy has also taken root, in which huge, albeit insufficient, aid flows to Sudan are lucrative for many humanitarian agencies and create many vested interests that can further entrench perpetual crisis response, as seen in Somalia (see Mohamed and Barter, 2026).

In relation to this, and just as critically, are the implications for how the formal aid sector engages with Sudanese civil society actors – humanitarian and otherwise. Giving primacy and funding to humanitarian response can distort civic (and political) activity that can undermine locally led efforts to address conflict drivers and pursue justice (see Moallin et al., 2025). Minimising such negative impacts is paramount for Sudan, where the current war must be understood within a longer time horizon of decades of violence and divisions, but also struggles for liberation, including the popular revolution that overthrew the dictator Omar Al-Bashir in 2019. However, most international engagement with Sudan favours top-down political negotiations, rather than engaging with civil society networks. These issues crystallise no more so than with Sudan's globally acclaimed mutual aid systems.

4.3 Humanitarian primacy risks depoliticising liberation struggles

The scale of violence and volatility in Sudan has posed immense challenges for international humanitarian operations, consequently yielding space for the rise of dynamic locally led action and questioning the typically dominant role of international agencies. Across the country, humanitarian access has been highly constrained by armed actors, particularly the RSF and SAF, while acute insecurity has also made humanitarian delivery difficult in many areas. The international aid system has struggled to adapt and continues to be very limited in where it can operate. Consequently, mutual aid actors have taken on a prominent humanitarian response role, reaching areas inaccessible to international aid agencies. These actors have also proven much more timely, adaptable and contextually relevant than their international counterparts, drawing upon traditions of communal solidarity (Ahmed, 2026).

The most visible and widely known mutual aid actors in Sudan are Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), which address a multitude of community needs far beyond ‘life-saving’ assistance. As an ERR interviewee explained:

The ERRs involve everyone – politicians, civil society and even engage with armed actors. They are an umbrella for creating broader social fabric, a new social contract.

Some of the ERRs are an evolution of Neighbourhood and Strike Committees that existed prior to, but came to increased prominence during, the 2019 revolution to overthrow the Al-Bashir regime, indicating their deeply political and activist foundations. The Strike Committees were critical in mobilising people, coordinating protests and building networks that also provided various emergency services (with significant parallels to the agile, networked revolution in Myanmar). They were intentionally focused on advancing democracy and social justice as part of a broader push for liberation against oppression (Srinivasan, 2021). Youth were central to the Strike Committees and are likewise for the ERRs, as the same interviewee explained:

It’s not just ERRs; it’s a youth movement. Some people think it’s just humanitarian, but we are also focused on the day after.

The success of the ERRs has led to significant attention and analysis, primarily focused on how the international humanitarian system is ineffective in supporting them. This includes examination of how risk is transferred, support is unsustainable and international assistance is not appropriately aligned with Sudanese priorities, amongst other issues (Hartelius et al., 2026). While the technical focus is important, there is also an emphasis on the need for the international aid system to ensure architecture that is generally transformative in its support (Ahmed, 2026). The problems are particularly evident with humanitarian funding flows, where only 1% of \$181 million from OCHA’s country-based pooled fund directly reached local and national actors (not specifically ERRs) in 2024 (Noe, 2025). The US’s 2026 global allocation to OCHA’s pooled funds is likewise almost entirely going to international agencies, undermining progress towards supporting locally led response.

Beyond funding and technical issues are concerns relating to the distortionary impacts of international engagement with Sudan’s mutual aid actors. This partly relates to mutual aid pluralism being flattened out to a reductionist focus on ERRs, which overlooks many nuances, particularly extensive civil and political pluralism. Even more concerning is that the humanitarian focus on ERRs and mutual aid actors is instrumentalising them for response delivery that pulls them away from their much broader political and activist origins and intentions. A Sudanese activist elaborated during an interview:

The international community wants to jump on board out of guilt. The ERRs are great, but they are presented as this beautiful, young endeavour that isn’t connected to politics. ERRs are from resistance committees and absolutely politically engaged. They toppled the regime. I get upset how the international community sanitises and depoliticises the ERRs for service delivery.

In this regard, there are also significant parallels to locally led solidarity and feminist movements in Palestine and Myanmar, as captured in the respective chapters of this study. For Sudan, communal solidarity is similarly deeply ingrained, particularly the concept of *nafeer* ('call to mobilise'). *Nafeer* originated from 'mobilising communal labour for collective tasks' (Conflict Sensitivity Facility, 2025: 3), but has continually evolved to strengthen trust, social support and broader collective action that are critical to resilience (ibid.). Against a backdrop of revolution and ensuing war, *nafeer* also underpins collective pursuits of liberation, with some parallels to *sumud*, or steadfastness (against atrocities), in Palestine. The presence and power of such values and systems is critical for reconfiguring humanitarian and broader aid systems. 'Localisation' or supporting locally led action is not simply about transferring power and resources to local and national actors; it is also about doing things differently and aligning with local knowledge and ways of being. Across Sudan, but also Palestine and Myanmar, this means addressing humanitarian needs is typically also intertwined with pursuits of liberation in the face of long-standing atrocities. Civic space and activity are critical dimensions.

4.4 Implications for the international aid architecture

The crisis in Sudan poses immense challenges, yet it is also illuminating in how it galvanises the need to move past an ill-suited aid status quo. The authors appreciate that considerable effort is being made to facilitate (top-down) peace and political negotiations. However, the continued framing of Sudan as a humanitarian crisis distorts attention away from the underlying drivers of crisis. As Srinivasan (2021) elucidates in extensive depth, international intervention in Sudan has consistently been reductionist, simplifying complex intersecting conflict and power dynamics to pursue 'make-do' peace. This has been compounded by a disregard for civic space and activity that is not a nice-to-have, but fundamental to addressing Sudan's war and rebuilding social cohesion. The international tendency towards simplification is hugely detrimental, as Srinivasan explains:

[It] influences and justifies future decisions that foreign peacemakers take. In Sudan, as in many 'complex emergencies', diplomats, embassy and NGO staffers and analysts quickly come and go. Alongside a preference for technocratic approaches, this creates a troubling 'institutional amnesia'. (ibid: 93)

Despite ineffectual international engagement, albeit with exceptions, Sudan's mutual aid actors are demonstrative of what can be done despite the formal aid system's problems. Yet, humanitarian primacy risks further instrumentalising what are much more holistic political pursuits of liberation. This risk is compounded by international actors being gatekeepers and even deploying 'identity coercion', such as pushing women's unions to rebrand as ERRs (Ahmed, 2026: 15). Such humanitarian 'exceptionalism' is yet another manifestation of short-term thinking at the expense of realising sustainable solutions, or to rephrase Srinivasan, 'when humanitarianism kills politics' the result is 'unending wars'.

Considering the lack of international political will to support peace and justice in Sudan, efforts must be reinvigorated to support mutual aid and other civil society actors, beyond instrumentalisation for humanitarian delivery, to include their broader political, justice and state-building pursuits. Like Myanmar and Palestine, it is not just about resistance, it is about steadfastness, feminism and social movements. For the international humanitarian system, this requires thoughtful engagement with mutual aid actors, the ERRs and otherwise, to minimise any potential depoliticisation. This means avoiding creating structures that incentivise depoliticisation and respecting Sudanese actors' efforts towards liberation, rather than imposing technocratic interpretations of neutrality that are ill-suited to the context.

5 Concluding thoughts

The scale of atrocities and injustices in Palestine, Myanmar and Sudan are individual and collective catastrophes. The crises do not just remain insufficiently addressed, they are actively exacerbated and perpetuated by oppressive systems of political and economic relations, such as settler colonialism and predatory capitalism. These systems of exploitation cannot sustain themselves through internal force alone, they depend on continuous external reinforcement, particularly military, financial, technical and diplomatic, often from many of the same states that fund the humanitarian response in each country. It creates a deep contradiction within the aid system: governments contributing to the conditions of crisis also position themselves as the largest donors responding to it. This must change. As this report has highlighted, each country is not simply a site of devastation, but also home to globally relevant pursuits of liberation.

As discussed in the Myanmar chapter, feminist humanitarianism is providing a more holistic approach towards the sector that provides a genuine alternative to challenging the often toxic and paternalistic oppression that people in many crisis-affected countries are facing. Feminist humanitarianism offers intersectional approaches that move beyond the constraints of traditional humanitarian frameworks to offer something transformative. In instilling a care-centred approach that also pursues justice and equity, this framework puts the needs of affected communities foremost in decision-making and planning. Similarly, the Palestinian concept of *sumud* as active collective determination to remain, to sustain life and to resist erasure, and Sudan's *nafeer*, emphasising community solidarity and mutual aid, are central to existence, humanity and liberation, in the face of oppression and extreme violence.

As a counter to damaging colonial hierarchies, feminist principles help move traditional humanitarian and aid practices beyond a traditionally Western hegemony while still delivering services to people in need with integrity. By drawing on feminist principles and increasing funding to feminist humanitarian actors and programmes, the humanitarian and broader aid sector has significant opportunity to meaningfully incorporate practices that have already proven hugely successful and address the ongoing root causes of crises discussed throughout this report. This is evident in Sudan, where the ERRs and broader mutual aid efforts are not simply meeting humanitarian needs, but recreating the country's social fabric through a whole-of-society approach. It also requires addressing the elephant in the room; predatory capitalism, such as that of the UAE and others, must be addressed to increase the likelihood for peace and justice.

A fundamental challenge facing humanitarianism is whether humanitarian actors will continue adapting to systems producing crisis or whether they will align themselves more clearly with struggles for justice, dignity and collective liberation. This does not mean politically partisan humanitarianism but instead ensuring a system that can meet immediate needs alongside providing scaffolding for people pursuing liberation, rather than the sector's tendency towards depoliticisation and technocracy. The formal humanitarian sector often presents itself as principled and absolute, yet it routinely operates in deeply

compromised environments that require navigating grey areas. This paper does not propose there are clear, easy solutions, or just one ‘right’ way. The dilemmas created have very real life and death consequences for humanitarian actors and communities.

Palestine offers one of the starkest tests, as an illustration of what is at stake for the humanitarian system globally. Gaza is ground zero: the testing ground for weapons, surveillance technologies and corporate, militarised humanitarianism, but equally for the political normalisation of mass atrocities and the systematic erosion of IHL. Palestine is not an anomaly, but a reflection of unaccountable brutality against civilians aided by international complicity, particularly from the US, the UK and Germany. However, Palestinians continue to resist erasure, and the international humanitarian system can play an important role through active solidarity and principled collective action in defiance of efforts to create fragmentation. Against powerful forces of oppression in Palestine, alongside Myanmar and Sudan, liberation and humanitarianism are inseparable. It is the aid system’s duty to align itself accordingly.

6 Recommendations

6.1 For all humanitarian and adjacent actors

- Be strategic about collective action. Where actors negotiate individually with parties restricting access, restrictions deepen. By contrast, the collective refusal of Israel's registration process, joint advocacy during the Gaza famine and sector-wide opposition to GHF were effective. Breadth is not always the goal – smaller coalitions can sometimes be more effective than a wide consensus, which can water down ambition.
- Collective action and solidarity must be normalised rather than being the exception; it has achieved significant success in pushing back against violence and efforts to restrict humanitarian space and action. This means alliance-building within and beyond humanitarian actors, including with human rights actors, media outlets and other adjacent sectors, to nurture an ecosystem for liberation. Examples include humanitarians documenting and providing evidence and support to human rights investigations.
- Critically reflect and identify pathways to avoid being part of humanitarian camouflage and otherwise contributing to systems of exploitation and oppression. Humanitarian actors must avoid legitimising systems and actors that enable coercive control, including coordination structures and private-sector partnerships that are embedded in surveillance, targeting, or siege infrastructures. Where engagement is unavoidable, strict safeguards against operational co-option should be enforced, combined with significant private and public advocacy efforts.
- Incorporate feminist principles of care, justice and equity into broader humanitarian frameworks, while ensuring appropriate funding to support and bolster existing intersectional work that is ongoing and largely being carried out by women working as frontline responders. Examples include strengthening space for women, including women's rights organisations, to meaningfully influence the design and operations of humanitarian programmes, from annual Humanitarian Response Plans to community-level initiatives.
- Tackle structural and institutionalised racism and patriarchal capitalism within the humanitarian system. This means addressing the ways that coordination mechanisms, partnership agreements and treatment of staff, for example, may replicate oppressive racialised hierarchies, silence those facing oppression and deprioritise care.

6.2 For international actors

6.2.1 Reorient humanitarian action towards structural drivers of crisis, not symptoms

International actors should shift from predominantly technocratic responses to approaches that explicitly engage with the political economy of crisis, particularly oppression and liberation dynamics. This means acknowledging and acting on the role of colonial legacies, extractive political economies, illicit financial flows and conflict economies (e.g. minerals in Myanmar, gold in Sudan, and blockade/occupation dynamics in Palestine). Humanitarian engagement should avoid reinforcing systems that sustain harm and instead prioritise strategies that challenge or, at minimum, do not entrench these structures. While navigating grey areas is inescapable in conflict settings, compromise must be conscious and bounded. Palestine and Myanmar highlight how over-compromise can backfire and result in profound contractions in humanitarian space.

6.2.2 Leverage political proximity to address root causes of crises

For staff situated in capitals whose governments supply weapons, provide diplomatic cover or hold leverage over perpetrators of IHL violations, they have an obligation to use that proximity to address root causes of oppression. For example, through sustained public and private advocacy on issues such as arms flows and holding perpetrators accountable. Impartiality and neutrality are not a licence for silence, as one humanitarian interviewee explained: ‘Impartiality and neutrality are what ALLOW us to speak out and speak consistently – silence doesn’t buy you access.’

6.2.3 Transform relationships with local civil society actors towards solidarity-based, decolonial partnership models

International actors should move beyond localisation as a humanitarian delivery mechanism that can be depoliticising, to instead operate in solidarity with locally led, often politically engaged, civil society and mutual aid networks. This includes:

- Removing or at least minimising incentive structures that encourage or force depoliticisation, including formal registration and bureaucratisation.
- Funding that is flexible, accessible and politically aware.
- Reduced compliance and reporting burdens that can endanger local actors.
- Sharing and taking risks rather than transferring them to local and national actors, from operational to advocacy levels, particularly involving speaking out against injustices.
- Aligning operational modalities with local principles, such as *sumud*, *nafeer* and feminist leadership.

6.2.4 Reconnect with humanitarian principles and institutional behaviour to avoid interpretations that lead to ‘neutrality-as-complicity’

Ensure institutional understanding and application of humanitarian principles do not obscure power relations or enable harm. Examples of how this can be achieved include:

- Actively interrogating engagement with states and armed actors implicated in violence and oppression of civilians. Neutrality and independence do not mean silence, nor do they mean avoiding popularly supported and legitimate resistance actors, as in Myanmar.
- Resisting partnerships or systems that instrumentalise aid for control, exclusion, profiteering or legitimacy, such as when it forms part of ‘humanitarian camouflage’.
- Ending private-sector partnerships with nefarious private sector actors, such as WFP’s partnership with Palantir.

6.2.5 Protect independent humanitarian space and resist the restructuring of aid to exclude critical principled actors

- International actors should prioritise defending independent humanitarian presence, transparency, and protection of civil society and frontline responders. This includes resisting regulatory frameworks that exclude principled actors, silence documentation of violations, or reshape humanitarian delivery to align with occupation or other forms of oppression.

Humanitarian actors can and should act as partners to the wider human rights/justice ecosystem (through targeted principled collaboration with human rights actors, legal actors and journalists), but humanitarian presence should not become a substitute for the wider presence of these actors that are critical for accountability – advocacy for their continued presence and space is essential. Considering the atrocities and injustices outlined in this report and across the world, a better, more interconnected humanitarianism is not just preferable, but critical for the depth of challenges we face.

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Humanitarian Policy Group

ODI Global
Four Millbank
London SW1P 3JA
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Email: hpgadmin@odi.org
Website: odi.org/hpg
