Gaza's Frozen Humanitarian Crisis

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Nov 17, 2026

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Brief Analysis

Ongoing political uncertainty is no excuse to continue delaying serious humanitarian assistance, which could not only help prevent a civilian disaster amid dire winter forecasts, but also yield visible progress toward U.S. diplomatic goals.

The October 2025 ceasefire brought real, if partial, humanitarian relief to the Gaza Strip, with Israel committing to let in about 600 trucks per day **(https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/cogat-gaza-merchants-suspending-coordination-for-goods-shipments-amid-hamas-threats/)** , food coming back to markets, and other signs of progress emerging. A year on, however, progress has stalled and some early gains have been reversed. For example, some 1.98 million people **(https://www.sheltercluster.org/palestine/documents/shelter-severity-and-household-needs-across-accessible-areas-gaza)** (94% of the population) need shelter assistance, while almost a million live in sites vulnerable to flooding risk just as the rainy season is beginning.

The impediments to an adequate response—let alone to recovery and reconstruction—have hardly changed since the ceasefire, and although some of them are technical, most are political. Until the next Israeli government is formed, and probably for a while afterward, no leader in Jerusalem will want to be seen enabling visible improvements in territory still run by Hamas. As the U.S.-led Board of Peace (BoP) awaits a more permissive political environment in Israel, it should design a better response that addresses the shortcomings of the current effort, while also linking accelerated humanitarian and basic recovery campaigns to feasible political outcomes.

Conditions on the Ground

Gaza's overall humanitarian situation remains dire, with the most acute needs related to shelter, sanitation, water, and public health. An estimated 82% **(https://press.un.org/en/2026/db260807.doc.htm)** of buildings in the Strip are damaged, and 65% of households **(https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-report-25-september-2026)** still live in tents or makeshift structures. Others have moved back into buildings that are unsafe.

Water and sanitation services have not recovered adequately either. On average, households receive 4.3 liters

(https://response.reliefweb.int/palestine/water-sanitation-and-hygiene) of drinking water per person per day, well below the emergency minimum. All six of Gaza's wastewater treatment plants are out of service, so more than 150,000 cubic meters (https://www.newarab.com/news/gazas-destroyed-sewage-plants-spread-pollution-amid-devastation) of untreated wastewater flow into the environment every day. These conditions help explain the spread of communicable diseases, including impetigo (https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-report-18-september-2026) and viral meningitis (https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-report-13-november-2026). Medical evacuations remain limited, with only (https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-report-29-october-2026) a few dozen per week leaving through Rafah and some 18,000 patients still on the evacuee list.

The approaching winter is expected to aggravate the situation given heavier rain forecasts (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/almost-all-gaza-residents-need-shelter-as-el-nino-threatens-heavy-flooding-un-agency-says/), as illustrated by images of flooded tents on November 8. The following day, the BoP issued a statement "urging the Israeli government to authorize the entry of essential materials," yet this might be too little, too late. Last winter, which was relatively dry, at least 11 children (https://www.unicef.org/sop/reports/unicef-state-palestine-humanitarian-situation-update) reportedly died of hypothermia, clinics treated frequent burn cases caused by fires lit inside tents for warmth, and the prevalence of skin diseases and respiratory cases doubled. This year, the population is packed even more tightly because the Israeli-controlled portion of Gaza marked by the Yellow Line has expanded. Hundreds of thousands of people live in high-risk flood sites and may have to move, but safer areas are highly restricted.

Meanwhile, emergency shelter kits continue (https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-report-15-october-2026) to wait outside Gaza (https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-report-15-october-2026), and dual-use restrictions continue to hold up (https://islamic-relief.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/10/OPT-Humanitarian-Advocacy-Update-October-2026.pdf) the delivery of tent poles, generators, and metal pallets (https://islamic-relief.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/10/OPT-Humanitarian-Advocacy-Update-October-2026.pdf). Even if more such items are allowed to enter soon, however, Gaza's debilitated infrastructure will still require urgent, substantial repairs that go beyond basic humanitarian assistance.

Collective Blame

This crisis is the outcome of a collective failure, primarily on the following issues:

Hamas remains the de facto sovereign in Gaza. The group has been reasserting itself (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/one-year-after-gaza-ceasefire-part-2-how-hamas-has-kept-its-grip-governance) in recent months, running checkpoints, regulating prices, taxing traders, intimidating humanitarian teams, and requiring registration by international NGOs. This creates real tension between maintaining a steady flow of supplies into Gaza and limiting what Hamas can use as a revenue source, divert for military purposes, and/or claim political credit for.

Although Israel's concerns about these problems are well-founded, the near-term response should be a more strategic and deliberate effort to obstruct Hamas from exploiting international aid, not a wholesale rejection of this aid. Ultimately, the group will continue abusing such assistance as long as it remains the de facto government in Gaza. One way to start changing that reality is by allowing the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG) and the Palestinian Authority to help with the humanitarian effort. The PA still has various formal and informal roles in Gaza (e.g., population registration, licensing, border crossing management, water distribution), and UN agencies lean on it for political cover.

Dual-use restrictions. Currently, Israel considers many of the items that Gaza needs for winterization, water

management, sanitation, and public health as dual-use, restricting any civilian items that have potential military applications for Hamas. Again, these concerns are valid, especially given the group's well-documented efforts to dig up water pipes for use in manufacturing rockets (e.g., see this **Times of London video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZn2h_UQ-Hk)** from 2023), and its recent **seizure (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2026/11/10/hamas-seizes-tents-from-homeless-gazans-during-deadly-storm/)** of tents intended for civilians. Yet the longer-term risk of Hamas exploiting dual-use items must be weighed against the short-term risk of aggravating the humanitarian situation for Gazans, creating public health and water security **(https://www.timesofisrael.com/new-masterplan-needed-after-desalination-shutdown-underlines-dangers-of-tech-overreliance/)** problems for Israelis, and further undermining Jerusalem's fragile international legitimacy.

Moreover, Hamas has shown that it has many other ways to rearm besides diverting aid. In the past two months, for example, unpublished reports indicate that it organized a campaign to gather damaged pistols, rifles, rocket-propelled grenade rounds, and explosive devices for repair or reuse. Gaza is also full of unexploded ordnance that can be similarly refurbished.

Rather than a blanket ban, Israel's security would be better served by a narrower dual-use list focused on strategic threats. This list could be coupled with more effective end-use monitoring for particularly sensitive items, as well as lessons from previous recovery efforts like the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM).

Lack of humanitarian "czars." One of the key hindrances to a concerted joint effort has been the absence of top officials permanently designated to spearhead the humanitarian file. This is a problem on both the Israeli side and the international side, including the UN. Since the war broke out on October 7, 2023, the UN has replaced its humanitarian lead in Jerusalem—who is responsible for Gaza—five times. The creation of working groups and other communication channels between the BoP, NGOs, and the UN has been a positive, yet these processes remain cumbersome and are run in parallel tracks between teams at the International Gaza Support Center (formerly the CMCC), the BoP, and Israel's National Security Council and Office of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT). As long as Jerusalem declines to empower a senior official with authority over the humanitarian-related operations of relevant government bodies—including COGAT, the military, key ministries, and various customs and border authorities—Israeli officials will likely continue avoiding responsibility for approving politically controversial steps. In practice, this means perpetually stalled decisions on matters of strategic importance.

Shrinking funds. According to the latest publicly available figures from July, the $4.06 billion that the UN requested from donors in its annual appeal for Gaza and the West Bank was **less than 40% funded (https://www.ochaopt.org/content/flash-appeal-response-monitoring-july-2026)** . Similarly, the World Food Programme notes that current funding for its Palestinian operations is **roughly half (https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/10/1168622)** what it received in previous years, and that it needs $450 million to keep operating through March. Although the BoP announced earlier this year that it had garnered $17 billion in pledges, only a small portion of this money has actually been received. Few governments want to pay to rebuild what could be destroyed again if fighting resumes, or underwrite a status quo with no political horizon. Tying reconstruction to Hamas disarmament has left much of the money waiting on a step that has seen zero progress over the past year. In addition, donor fatigue is evident as the interminable Gaza crisis competes for attention with other wars and shrinking budgets.

Fewer capable implementing players inside Gaza. Early this year, Israel revoked the registration of thirty-seven international NGOs operating in the Strip, including large ones such as Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). Moreover, Israeli law bars government authorities from dealing with the UN Relief and Works Agency, creating financial and

capacity limitations for an organization that still runs schools and clinics in Gaza. Regardless of Jerusalem's deep and well-justified concerns about UNRWA, the fact is that limiting the agency's role has left a vacuum, as there is currently no alternative body with its ability to perform those functions at scale. UNRWA is apparently seeking to transfer its service provision functions to the PA or NCAG, but both of these bodies **are still absent (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chapeau-assessing-gaza-ceasefire-year-one)** from Gaza themselves.

How to Move Forward

Although political movement will likely have to wait for the formation of Israel's next government, the BoP and its partners need not—and should not—wait to activate serious humanitarian planning, which can turn into visible progress when conditions ripen. In September, the board **unveiled (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2026/09/board-of-peace-unveils-gaza-recovery-plan-israel-reports-18-ceasefire-violations-sept-15-29.php)** an ambitious agenda of sixty-six projects largely focused on infrastructure and "peace and security." Yet in order to ensure that these projects prioritize urgent humanitarian needs and have the intended stabilization effects, the board's plan must be geographically broadened. The currently proposed pilot zone for these efforts is the Rafah neighborhood on the Israeli side of the Yellow Line, but the vast majority of Gaza's population resides on the other side of the line. To be effective, humanitarian response and recovery efforts need to occur where the people are. A feasible plan also requires a more realistic timeline than the six months specified by the BoP, as well as an appropriate budget and capable implementation partners inside Gaza.

One top priority is an empowered Israeli point of contact, ideally in the Prime Minister's Office. In the longer term, Jerusalem will need to designate a more permanent official for this role, with real authority over multiple government and military bodies so that agreed initiatives can be implemented in a timely manner. That designation will likely have to wait until the next government is formed. In the meantime, however, Washington should still press Jerusalem to assign a point of contact who can take ownership of the commitments the BoP has already secured. These commitments should be made public now, so that whoever forms the next government can mitigate public criticism by arguing that they are merely implementing the outgoing government's pledges. Notably, leveraging **U.S. leadership from the top (https://thehill.com/opinion/international/6102436-israel-hamas-conflict-management/)** will remain the best means of getting the next government to change course quickly.

For its part, the UN should immediately appoint a resident humanitarian coordinator to help streamline efforts by different agencies. The arrival of a new UN secretary-general in January will also offer an opening to help rebuild a working relationship between Israel and UN agencies, including a practical transition for the services that UNRWA still provides.

Of course, humanitarian and recovery issues cannot be completely divorced from governance issues. Washington and its partners should therefore ensure that the NCAG has a real role in the accelerated humanitarian campaign—a role that can be developed into transitional governance efforts later on. This means permitting committee members to start building a presence inside Gaza through local outreach before the NCAG as a whole formally enters the Strip.

Engaging the PA is important as well, since its support will be needed to align humanitarian efforts by the UN, NGOs, and the broader donor community. The twenty-point U.S. plan for Gaza talks about the PA's eventual return to the Strip. Accordingly, the BoP should use that plan as leverage to coerce the PA into reforms, instead of using the PA's flaws as a reason to exclude it from planning for the territory's future governance.

Finally, the BoP should keep pressing donors to turn pledges into actual money, starting with the winter shelter gap. It should also prepare to enlist existing and potential partners on wider recovery and reconstruction efforts if political conditions improve.

None of these steps are intended to replace the tough decisions on disarmament and governance, but they are needed to keep Gaza livable in the meantime. The risks of action are real, but so are the risks of inaction—first and foremost for the lives and dignity of Palestinians, but also for Israel's international standing, which is already at a low point and will not be aided by images of flooded tents and sick children this winter.

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