



# Starvation as a weapon of war: A case of Olives and Potatoes

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almost two centuries ago there was a phenomenon that occurred in Ireland infamously known as the “potatoe famine” however history of colonization proves otherwise. The historians claim that the Irish Potato Famine of 1845-1849 was caused by an ecological accident due to the overdependence of the Irish on the potato, which was devastated by a fungal disease. The British called the Irish stereotypes such as lazy, promiscuous, and overpopulated, and explained how their population growth was a result of their role in the famine. While as the real cause of the famine was the oppressive and exploitative policies of the English government, which had colonized Ireland and taken over its land and resources, and unfair laws that deprived the Irish of their rights, their income, and their food security.

In truth, the most obvious cause of the famine was not a plant disease, but England's long-standing political dominance over Ireland. The English conquered Ireland multiple times and gained control of large agricultural lands. Large tracts of land were distributed to Englishmen. The famine was not a natural disaster, but a man-made catastrophe that killed one million people and forced millions more to emigrate. Like other famines, it had little to do with decreases in food production in general. Adam Smith was correct: "bad seasons" cause "dearth," but "the violence of well-intentioned governments" can turn "dearth into famine."

Two centuries later, it seems quite similar to the ongoing war between Israel and Palestine where forced starvation is also being used as a means of colonization. The olive tree, which represents Palestinian rootedness and endurance, became a target for the colonial Zionist-European enterprise in Palestine. This campaign sought to portray Palestine as a desolate desert. Following the Nakba, Israel uprooted 800,000 Palestinians, burned over 530 villages, and destroyed millions of olive trees, which were replaced by pine forests. Discriminatory policies, like as the Fallow Lands Regulations of 1948, aided the takeover of Palestinian lands by designating them as "closed zones," denying expelled Palestinians the right to return. The destruction of olive trees, vital to Palestinian lives, demonstrates a historical pattern of dispossession and discrimination against Palestinians, as the state continues to control and reallocate lands to its agencies. This persistent assault on the olive tree symbolizes the ongoing struggle of Palestinians in their homeland.

Since 1967, the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem (ARIJ) estimates that 2.5 million trees have been uprooted, with one-third being olive trees and the rest being different fruit trees, including approximately 34,000 palm trees.<sup>7</sup> Between 2007 and 2011, armed settlers upped their attacks on olive trees by 315 percent.<sup>8</sup> From 2010 to 2015, settlers vandalized around 50,000 olive trees and saplings. In January 2015, Israelis in the Palestinian Territories removed or vandalized around 5,600 trees in the West Bank, as reported by UNOCHA.

Currently in the ongoing war thousands have died and the rest are left at the mercy of aid, which is constantly blocked as a means of collective punishment. In November 2023, Human Rights Watch accused the Israeli government of using famine as a form of warfare in the occupied Gaza Strip, claiming that Israeli forces intentionally obstruct the delivery of critical commodities such as water, food, and gasoline. According to the United Nations World Food Programme, a large proportion of households in northern and southern Gaza have experienced extreme hunger.

According to the International Criminal Court's Rome Statute, purposely starving civilians by "depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including willfully impeding relief supplies" constitutes a war crime. Starvation of civilians as a means of warfare is outlawed by Article 54(1) of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions (Protocol I) and Article 14 of the Second Additional Protocol (Protocol II). Although Israel is not a signatory to Protocols I or II, the restriction is recognized as consistent with conventional international humanitarian law in armed conflicts that are both international and non-international.

Israel controls all movement in Gaza, including airspace, and infrastructure, which left the population dependent on Israel for access to fuel, electricity, medicine, and food. A "total blockade" imposed on October 9 worsened the crisis. On November 17, the World Food Programme (WFP) warned of an "immediate possibility" of starvation, and later reports indicated a "high risk of famine" by December 3. By December 6, 48 percent of homes in northern Gaza and 38 per cent of displaced people in southern Gaza were suffering from "severe levels of hunger". On November 3, the Norwegian Refugee Council reported catastrophic water, sanitation, and hygiene requirements in Gaza.

On January 26<sup>th</sup> 2024, The ruling issued by the ICJ ordered six provisional measures including for Israel to refrain from acts under the Genocide Convention, prevent and punish the direct and public incitement to genocide, and take immediate and effective measures to ensure the provision of humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza.

## References:

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