

U.S. veterans launch 40-day fast to protest Israel's starvation of Gaza



Members of Veterans For Peace begin the first week of a 40-day fast in support of Gaza on May 27, 2025. Veterans For Peace via X

“Having seen what war does ... I simply have to do more than hold a sign at a demonstration,” said one veteran organizer.

By Marjorie Cohn / Truthout

As the death toll of Palestinians continues to rise and more than a half a million people in Gaza are on the brink of starvation, U.S.-based Veterans For Peace and several allied organizations have launched a 40-day “Fast for Gaza.”

From May 22 to June 30, 600 people in the U.S. and abroad are fasting and demanding full humanitarian aid to Gaza under UN authority and an end to U.S. weapons shipments to Israel.

Mary Kelly Gardner, a teacher from Santa Cruz, California, told Truthout she joined the fast in memory of her late father, a service member in Vietnam who “staunchly opposed U.S. militarism.” He opposed “the so-called ‘war on terror’ and ongoing U.S. violence against Middle Eastern countries,” she said. Gardner is limiting herself to 250 calories for the first 10 days of the fast. “Then I will switch to fasting during daylight (as Muslims observing Ramadan do).”

Palestinians in Gaza are being forced to survive on 245 calories per day; 250 calories daily is considered a starvation diet, as the body breaks down muscle and other tissues. Prolonged fasting can cause dehydration, heart problems, kidney failure and even death.

Gardner is distressed because her “tax dollars are being used to fund this horrific violence” (which, she noted, constitutes genocide) “in the form of weapons shipments.” She feels the need to speak out. Gardner said her goals are to “get people’s attention with a meaningful action” and “engage in a practice that challenges me to be more personally present with the human suffering taking place in Gaza.” She is “intentionally causing myself some discomfort and inconvenience,” yet “not harming myself.”

For 11 weeks, using starvation as a weapon of war, Israel has blocked all food, medicine and other relief from entering the Gaza Strip, home to 2.1 million Palestinians. Now aid is trickling in under the auspices of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF), a delivery system established by the U.S. and Israel to bypass the UN, provide a fig leaf of aid and blunt global outrage at Israel’s starvation tactics. Risk of famine comes even as Israel intensifies its military campaign. On May 27, the Palestinian Ministry of Health reported at least 54,056 people killed, including at least 17,400 children, and at least 123,129 people injured in Gaza since October 7, 2023.

On the sixth day of the fast, Kathy Kelly, board president of World BEYOND War, told Truthout:

On day 6 of the fast, limiting ourselves to 250 calories per day helps us focus on Gazans with no relief in sight. But Palestinians face intense risks of aerial attacks, sniper assaults, housing demolition, forcible displacement and genocidal threats from Israel and its allies to eradicate them.

On day 6 of the fast, I am wondering about Ron Feiner, the Israeli reservist sent to prison three days ago for refusal to go to Gaza. How is he faring? He told the judge who sentenced him to 20 days in prison that he couldn’t cooperate with Prime Minister Netanyahu’s sabotage of ceasefire agreements. We acutely need his witness. I’m hungry for solidarity.

On day 6 of the fast, we’re remembering the names and ages of Dr. Alaa al-Najjar’s children. Their charred corpses came to her as she worked a shift in the pediatric ward of Gaza’s Khan Younis hospital. Dr. Hamdi al-Najjar, her spouse, was gravely injured in the Israeli military attack on their home — an attack which left only one child surviving.

Kelly listed the names and ages of the al-Najjar children: Yahya, 12 years old; Rakan, 10 years old; Eve, 9 years old; Jubran, 8 years old; Ruslan, 7 years old; Reval, 5 years old; Sadin, 3 years old; Luqman, 2 years old; and Sidar, 6 months old. Eleven-year-old Adam, the sole surviving child, was critically injured in the Israeli bombing.

US and Israel Provide Gaza With a Mere Fig Leaf of Aid

The fast comes as the U.S. and Israel have launched a plan in concert with the GHF. The plan is to be carried out by ex-Marines, former CIA operatives, as well as mercenaries connected with Israeli intelligence. GHF has come under increasing criticism from the UN and dozens of international humanitarian organizations.

Ten people have been killed this week and at least 62 were wounded by the Israeli military as starving Palestinians gathered at a GHF aid distribution site in Rafah in southern Gaza. Although Israel says that 388 trucks entered Gaza during the past week, that number doesn't come close to the requisite 500-600 trucks that entered daily before Israel cut off all aid on March 2.

In January, after spending months making unfounded accusations against the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Israel banned it from operating in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. UNRWA is the agency that has provided food, health care and education to Palestinian refugees since 1949. UN Secretary General António Guterres has said that "UNRWA is indispensable in delivering essential services to Palestinians," and "UNRWA is the backbone of the United Nations humanitarian relief operations" in Gaza.

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Guterres slammed the GHF, saying the aid operation violates international law. In a joint statement, two dozen countries — including the U.K., several European Union member states, Canada, Australia and Japan — criticized the GHF model. They charged that it wouldn't deliver aid effectively at the requisite scale and would tie aid to military and political objectives.

A leaked UN memo reportedly warned against UN involvement in the GHF, saying it could be "implicated in delivering a system that falls short of Israel's legal responsibilities as an occupying power." UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher called the scheme "a deliberate distraction" and "a fig leaf for further violence and displacement."

The GHF was established after Israel charged that Hamas was looting aid trucks, a claim refuted by Cindy McCain, executive director of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and widow of Republican Sen. John McCain.

"Right now, we have 500,000 people inside of Gaza that are extremely food insecure, and could be on the verge of famine if we don't help bring them back from that. We need to get in, and we need to get in at scale, not just a few dribble [sic] of the trucks right now, as I said, it's a drop in the bucket," McCain said on "Face the Nation with Margaret Brennan."

In a March 2025 report, the UN body that monitors famine found that 470,000 people in the Gaza Strip have reached "Phase 5: Catastrophe/Famine," which means that households have an extreme lack of food and/or other basic needs. Moreover, 96 percent of Gaza's population is experiencing "acute food insecurity," and 22 percent of those in Gaza are suffering from "catastrophic levels" of food insecurity.

McCain said, "These people are desperate, and they see a World Food Programme truck coming in, and they run for it. This — this doesn't have anything to do with Hamas or any kind of organized crime, or anything. It has simply to do with the fact these people are starving to death."

GHF has a cynical purpose. It "aims to push northern residents to relocate southward in search of food — a step toward their displacement from Gaza altogether," UNRWA Commissioner General Philippe Lazzarini said. "We used to have, before, 400 distribution places, centres in Gaza. With this new system, we are talking about three to four, maximum, distribution places. So it's also a way to incite people to be forcibly displaced to get humanitarian assistance."

Issam Abu Shaweesh, director of a WFP aid distribution center in western Gaza City, said the GHF aid packages don't contain essential food items such as meat, eggs, vegetables, fruits and baby formula — evidence that the goal is just “to keep people from dying of hunger” instead of meeting basic nutritional needs.

The Government Media Office in Gaza issued a statement saying that, “The so-called ‘safe distribution sites’ are nothing but ‘racially isolated ghettos’ established under the supervision of the occupation, in exposed and isolated military areas, and are a forced model for the booby-trapped ‘humanitarian corridors’ that are used as a cover to advance the occupation’s security agendas.”

Two senior officials of GHF have resigned: Executive Director Jake Wood said the organization’s plans are inconsistent with the “humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence.” CEO David Burke also resigned.

The resignations came days after Swiss authorities considered opening an investigation into GHF, which had been registered in Geneva. On May 29, Swiss authorities found the organization was violating Swiss law.

“Having seen what war does, not just to people but all living things, I simply have to do more than hold a sign at a demonstration,” Mike Ferner, former national director of Veterans For Peace and co-organizer of the fast, told Truthout. “Many, many people feel the same way and that’s why in just five days, over 600 people in the U.S. and beyond have registered to participate,” he said, adding: “Until Americans actually run their government and direct our wealth to sustain life, we will have to protest in the strongest ways possible.”

“The Marine veteran who started the fast with me, Phil Tottenham, said this genocide pained him so much he wanted to do what Aaron Bushnell did but didn’t have the courage. ‘But what is the most we can do?,’ Tottenham asked,” Ferner said. Bushnell, a member of the U.S. Air Force, died after setting himself on fire outside the front gate of the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C. on February 25, 2024, in protest of Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

“Watching hundreds of people maimed, burned, and killed every day just tears at my insides — too much like when I nursed hundreds of wounded from our war in Viet Nam,” Ferner said in a press release from the Institute for Public Accuracy. “I’m fasting to demand humanitarian aid resumption under UN authority and to stop U.S. weapons from fueling the genocide.”

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