How should Australia respond to the starvation of Gaza?

by Annabel Dulhunty

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Displaced Palestinians line up and wait to fill their containers with water in Gaza City on 6 May 2025
Photo Credit: World Food Programme

It has now been more than two months since Israel began to block the entry of food and medicine to Gaza. According to the World Food Programme, about 1.94 million people across the Gaza Strip experienced high levels of acute food insecurity between 1 April and 10 May 2025, including nearly 244,000 people facing catastrophic food insecurity. The Gaza Media Office claims 290,000 children may now be on the "brink of death". Twenty United Nations Human Rights council experts last week called for measures to end the "annihilation" of Palestinians in Gaza and said that the world had to make a "stark decision" — to "remain passive and witness the slaughter of innocents or take part in crafting a just resolution". Around 3,000 trucks carrying aid from UNRWA are currently stuck waiting for entry to Gaza.

Starvation is a particularly cruel and inhumane way to die. Working in humanitarian aid and development for over fifteen years, I have often felt devastated at how the world can turn a blind eye to the suffering of people in places wracked by famine or war, deemed too "far away" to care about.

Yet what is most galling about the starvation of Gaza is the West's complicity. It is not merely a case of ignoring a terrible crime against humanity, but also of aiding and abetting it. In the past 19 months, the United States government has provided US$17.9 billion to Israeli military operations. It is reported that since September last year, the United Kingdom has sent 8,630 separate munitions to Israel, despite the announced suspension of arms export licenses. Amnesty International has also accused Australia of exporting armaments to Israel via exports to the United States which are then sent to Israel. This indirect approach has enabled the Albanese government to claim it has not exported arms to Israel. However, the Australian government and its Western allies are coming under pressure from civil society organisations to stop all arms exports to Israel, direct and indirect, including exports of Australian-made weapons components being used in the manufacture of F-35 fighter jets used against Gaza.

With the win by the Labor Party in the recent Australian federal election, prominent government ministers have also been keen to cast Gaza as a “divisive”, partisan issue. The Australian press has followed suit. Journalist Matthew Knott wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald, “Labor believes its electoral success has vindicated its attempt to craft a balanced and moderate policy on the vexed issue of the Middle East”. He quotes Penny Wong: “A clear lesson from the election is that Australians don’t want political leaders to amplify overseas conflict for their own purposes as the Greens and Liberals did”. Labor MP Julian Hill on X similarly states, “the extremist populist left and reactionary right shamefully weaponised the Gaza conflict”.

Yet how is it a fringe, “extremist” position to call out the continued export of arms to Israel and the government’s near-silence on Israel’s actions? Never could I have imagined that it would be considered “balanced and moderate” to let a population be starved to death. This lack of condemnation and action is particularly perplexing given the International Criminal Court’s arrest warrant for Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (along with Israel’s former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant). There is a widespread view that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Francesca Albanese, the UN special rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories.

Many seem to be afraid of condemning Israel’s actions for fear of being labelled “antisemitic”. Yet how is it antisemitic to criticise a far-right government led by an accused war criminal such as Netanyahu, who arguably continues the war in Gaza so that he does not have to be held accountable to his own citizens? Netanyahu has been able to use the war on Gaza to delay legal cases against him for corruption continuously, with legal action now likely delayed until 2026. There is a diversity of Jewish voices and not all of them support Netanyahu. For example, the Jewish Council of Australia has condemned Netanyahu’s actions and the genocide in Gaza.

As it stands, the government of Israel has proposed letting aid into Gaza on its own terms, to hubs controlled by the military. Yet this plan appears to use humanitarian aid as “bait” — with supplies for only one-tenth of the population aimed at luring Gazans to collection points. Jens Laerke, spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs calls it a “deliberate attempt to weaponize the aid”. According to UNICEF spokesperson James Elder, this plan ”contravenes basic humanitarian principles” and would create an “impossible choice between displacement and death”.

While we may seem removed from the situation in Gaza, Australia can do much more to try to end this human suffering. For example, Australia can grant more visas to Palestinian refugees — Australia has so far rejected over 7000 applications. It can revoke permits to export to the United States for arms produced by Electro

Optic Systems, Lockheed Martin and Thales Australia, contingent upon legally binding guarantees that these commodities will not be sent to Israel. Instead of using tepid language to describe Israel's actions, Australia can also take a much stronger stance in condemnation of the genocide, and apply targeted sanctions. It can also join 148 countries, including Norway, Ireland and Spain, in recognising Palestine as a state. Australia's unequivocal condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine provides an important template for strong Australian condemnation of violations of International Humanitarian Law.

If Australia does not act now, it will remain complicit in the mass starvation of hundreds of thousands of children. Surely, that is something worth speaking out and acting on.

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Link: https://devpolicy.org/how-should-australia-respond-to-the-starvation-of-gaza-20250515/