PODCAST | POLITICS

US Private Contractors in Gaza with Safa Joudeh

By: Safa Joudeh · June, 2025

The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Safa Joudeh 0:00

Really these distribution points in this aid mechanism are a way to achieve ethnic cleansing in Gaza and of moving the population south. And this is not to mention the use of the foundation or the distribution points as tools of collective punishment through the very undignified and inhumane way of managing these distribution points, which are constructed as narrow cages that Palestinians have to be crammed into in order to access aid, and there have been repeated massacres as well.

Yara Hawari 0:35

From Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, I am Yara Hawari, and this is Rethinking Palestine.

This episode was recorded prior to the start of Israel's war with Iran, which has already claimed the lives of hundreds of civilians, mostly Iranian. Meanwhile, the Israeli regime continues to kill dozens of Palestinians on a daily basis in its ongoing genocide in Gaza, and is still limiting the entry of aid to a population that is being deliberately kept on the brink of starvation.

This episode focuses on the use of private security contractors and the weaponization of aid more broadly. Private security contractors, usually former military or secret service personnel from the global North, have long been a feature of so-called war zones. They were used extensively in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Palestine is no stranger to their presence either.

Recently, we have seen their deployment in Gaza, and in particular, they have been used to secure a new Israeli-backed USAID distribution mechanism, a mechanism which has received widespread critique and has also been accused of facilitating war crimes by UN officials. The privatization of aid and security in Gaza has had deadly consequences.

Indeed, many Palestinians have been shot and killed at these new aid distribution sites. It also paints a worrying future for aid in Palestine and beyond, where local and international institutions like UNRWA and other UN agencies are eroded and eventually replaced. Joining me to discuss this on this episode of Rethinking Palestine is Safa Joudeh, a postdoctoral researcher at the Arab and Islamic Studies Institute at the University of Exeter.

Safa recently published a policy memo on this very topic for Al-Shabaka, which can be found on our website, al-shabaka.org.

Safa, thank you for joining me.

Safa Joudeh 2:33

Thanks for having me.

Yara Hawari 2:35

Can you give us an overview of how private security contractors have been used during the genocide and what they have been typically recruited to do?

Safa Joudeh 2:45

In the current context, since the beginning of Israel's assault on Gaza in October 2023, private contractors have primarily been involved in aid distribution and in managing security operations and logistics tied to aid. The main operation that private security contractors were recruited to manage is the operation of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation.

The foundation was established in February 2025 by the Israeli and US governments in order to provide aid or to manage aid delivery into Gaza. And it has four distribution points in the southern Gaza Strip, which are controlled by armed personnel, private American security contractors. And these armed personnel are hired or recruited to manage the distribution operations in these sites.

They work in cooperation with the Israeli army, and so the sites are surrounded by Israeli military patrols. The job of the security contractors is to manage the operational side, to screen individuals, conduct identity checks, to crowd control, et cetera.

Yara Hawari 3:53

So, US private security contractors were deployed quite early on in the genocide, I think mainly to secure the US floating pier. Can you tell us more about that?

Safa Joudeh 4:06

Yes. In early 2024, the US announced plans to build a temporary pier off the coast of Gaza to facilitate the delivery of food, water, and medicine at a time when Israel was increasing the blockade or intensifying the blockade on Gaza. Private security contractors were hired to build and manage logistics and to operate the pier as well.

They were US private contractors, though the nature, the names of the companies weren't really released, but reports indicate that they were companies that had

operated previously in Iraq and Afghanistan. They constructed the pier and were there on the ground to manage aid delivery.

The pier suffered damage, and there were other logistical complications, and so it was dismantled after, I think, only three weeks in operation. So it wasn't really effective as a solution or a model in boosting humanitarian aid. But the idea primarily was to bypass land routes, was to bypass traditional mechanisms of delivering aid, primarily through land crossings, mainly the Kerem Shalom and the Rafah crossings, which Israel had either restricted or closed off at the time.

But the bigger picture also is to sort of establish these private entities working under Israeli oversight and to bypass not just traditional land routes, but also traditional aid delivery mechanisms carried out by NGOs and by UN staff. Highly problematic, not transparent. Again, the nature of these forces, the companies they belong to—all information that was never released.

And so no international bodies, no local bodies involved in these operations, no kind of legal mechanism or legal oversight. And just another example of how Israelis are experimenting with new aid distribution and broader governance models that would be able to bypass existing mechanisms and establish Israeli control indirectly by outsourcing these operations to private entities.

Yara Hawari 6:17

So, Safa, you've mentioned that these security contractors have been used to secure this new aid distribution mechanism, and you mentioned that it is American and receives backing from the Israeli regime. Can you tell us a bit more about it? Who's behind it? What are the sorts of different bodies involved?

Safa Joudeh 6:38

Yes, so the new aid distribution mechanism is significantly different from the traditional system of aid delivery in Gaza that was used before the genocide. It's

highly centralized under one entity, which is the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation. It's deeply politicized, and it's deeply militarized as well.

So the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation is a political entity. It was founded and funded by the US State Department in cooperation with the Israeli government, though funding sources are still quite opaque; but there are reports that the Israeli Mossad was also involved in the funding. The foundation involves consulting groups that have been linked to the Pentagon and other branches of the US military.

Some of them are headquartered in the US, like the Boston Consulting Group, which participated in the design and operational planning of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation. The Boston Consulting Group has its headquarters in the US, along with several offices in Israel. And of course, there's a heavy reliance on private security contractors, US-based companies that are employed to execute plans on the ground to manage aid, the entry of aid, and to manage and control access to aid.

So again, it's a deeply problematic politicized model where humanitarian functions are outsourced to politicized and militarized bodies, undermining humanitarian norms and using food and aid as a weapon of control. And the bigger picture here is not simply the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, but these emerging models that can be seen in aid distribution, also in security operations and checkpoints, and population management, and other aid distribution initiatives such as the US-led pier off the coast of Gaza.

This model of organizing humanitarian supplies and distributing supplies aims to bypass the existing system, the existing mechanisms that are traditionally carried out by neutral humanitarian actors, and to place oversight and control of humanitarian operations with the Israeli army. So there are a lot of questions around transparency, around accountability, potential violations, very dangerous

conditions, and, of course, the bigger picture of what kind of political landscape Israel is trying to formulate and to impose on Gaza.

Yara Hawari 9:16

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So, how is this new mechanism functioning? What does it look like? How are they distributing aid?

Safa Joudeh 9:32

The Gaza Humanitarian Foundation is in the form of distribution zones or distribution points that are located in the southern Gaza Strip.

They are points that are patrolled and controlled by private security contractors who manage aid distribution in these sites under the oversight of the Israeli army. There are four distribution sites in the southern Gaza Strip. And really the UN has called this a fig leaf or a way for Israel to manage the movement of the population, or demographic control of the Gaza population by forcing people to relocate to the southern parts of Gaza or risk starvation because Israel has prevented the entry of aid and the distribution of aid in any location beyond the four distribution sites of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation.

This has been a plan that has been put into action through repeated evacuations, forcing people to the south of Gaza, mass destruction of neighborhoods, and of homes, of infrastructure. It's also a plan that has been laid out by Israeli officials in the most recent ground offensive.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that Israeli forces would take control of all of Gaza and limit the presence of Palestinians to pre-designated

zones. Israeli finance minister Smotrich has also said that the entirety of Gaza would be destroyed. And so really, these distribution points and this aid mechanism are a way to achieve these objectives of ethnically cleansing Gaza and of moving the population south.

This is not to mention the use of the foundation or the distribution points as tools of collective punishment through the very undignified and inhumane way of managing these distribution points, which are constructed as narrow cages that Palestinians have to be crammed into in order to access aid, and there have been repeated massacres as well of Palestinians who have to walk for miles to access aid, to get to these distribution points.

So clearly, these distribution sites are not acting as a humanitarian lifeline, but more as a tool of demographic and territorial control.

Yara Hawari 11:52

We've all seen those horrific images of tens of thousands of Palestinians being forced to scramble for these very small aid boxes, and these sites have been referred to by many as essentially death traps.

It's really telling as well that many UN officials have said that this aid mechanism will be used to facilitate war crimes—war crimes of forced displacement, weaponization of aid, et cetera. So it's not only having sort of real-time, very deadly consequences, but also does not bode well for the future of the aid landscape in Gaza, but also beyond.

Safa Joudeh 12:30

In terms of what the situation will look like in Gaza the day after the war, and in terms of post-war governance, it seems through the arrangements that Israel is putting into place now that we're getting a view of what Israel's plans are for who will administer Gaza. There's been no substantial conversation towards planning

for the post-war situation.

Beyond the fact that it appears that Israel is not invested in reoccupying or retaking Gaza, it's unlikely that Hamas will be able to play a role in Gaza's governance. Even if Israel fails to destroy or disarm it and Hamas continues to exist as a political organization, Hamas itself has announced that it's relinquishing control of post-war administering or governance of Gaza.

So Hamas is unlikely to be there. Israel has refused any sort of suggestion for the PA to assume the role of administering Gaza. And so it appears that there will be a void. And the question is, who will fill this void? And it seems like what Israel is doing is constructing a landscape of a number of concentration camps, which are ruled by Israel-backed armed gangs or militias that are being funded and supported, and backed by Israel now, to operate in Gaza.

And the population's needs will be administered and met through these aid distribution points that Israel is setting up, almost as a pilot for some sort of permanent arrangement in order to provide services for the remaining population. So it's really a very worrying question about what the post-war governance landscape will look like.

It requires attention and serious action if a disastrous and tragic situation like the one we are seeing now at present is to be avoided.

Yara Hawari 14:26

Why are the Israelis trying to erode existing mechanisms for the distribution of aid, and why are they trying to erode UN institutions when they've actually previously relied on them to shoulder the responsibility of the continued occupation?

Safa Joudeh 14:44

UN bodies, especially UNRWA, have been providing humanitarian services in Gaza

for decades. I think 15 UN agencies, along with a network of NGOs and partners alongside traditional Palestinian governmental bodies, have been responsible for providing education services, healthcare services, food, and medical services to Palestinians for a long time now.

Israel allowed this, or sort of maintained this stable formula or this stable system, and actually relied on the UN and the international community alongside conventional Palestinian leadership for a reason, which is that Israel was able to maintain its occupation, its control of whether it's Gaza or as well in the West Bank.

Maintain a system of occupation and control without actually having to shoulder the responsibility, the cost, and being responsible for the welfare of the Palestinian population, of the population it occupies. After October 7th, Israel has sort of moved towards having greater security control, greater surveillance over Gaza.

This has been consolidated in looking to replace the existing system, the governance system, the aid delivery system, primarily led by the UN and UNRWA in particular, with a centralized aid delivery system in the form of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, which operates under Israeli and US control and security coordination.

This is sort of in the medium term, in the bigger picture. UNRWA's mandate, which provides the majority of education, primary education, and medical services and humanitarian services to Palestinians, its mandate is rooted in the Palestinian right to return, and it is the institutional sort of expression and protection of this right.

And so by dismantling UNRWA and its work in Gaza, Israel seeks to undermine the legal status of Palestinian refugees and their claim to their right of return and turn this state of displacement and also the annexation—its plans to annex parts of Gaza—into a permanent arrangement.

Yara Hawari 16:55

As you said, Hamas will not have any role in governing post-genocide, that has been made clear. And the Israelis have also said that the PA should not have a role in that either. And so, where does that leave local institutions that have been very much involved in efforts to distribute aid to local communities?

Safa Joudeh 17:20

I think something really important to talk about, which is what I think was left out of the conversation, is what the existing governance arrangements looked like before October 7th in Gaza. The government apparatus, the management of government institutions and departments—as a ruling party in Gaza, Hamas took control of ministries, of governmental institutions by installing Hamas employees and officials at the management level of these institutions and departments. Figures who were sometimes, though not always, politically aligned with Hamas, but the overall structure of governance institutions, the structure, the administrative structure of these bodies, is something that was inherited from the PA.

It existed before Hamas. Many of the key institutions and government bodies, in fact, almost all of them, weren't changed. Technical and administrative staff in all fields remained in their departments, providing public services to residents. So, really much of this structure was inherited from the PA.

It's been built up since 1994. There was no parallel governance structure that Hamas somehow controlled and used to govern Gaza, which would technically mean that it's possible to end Hamas's governing role in Gaza by removing its officials from the government apparatus, managers, politically aligned figures, while maintaining the formal structures of these government institutions and the bureaucracy, which is staffed with thousands of employees who have no affiliation with Hamas across these departments.

But Israel is not out to undermine Hamas or to destroy Hamas. It's out to destroy Palestinian self-rule by creating a complete breakdown in governance in Gaza and removing the structures that existed.

This is very clear, through targeting the government and municipal buildings, alongside targeting public infrastructure—water, sewage, electricity, et cetera—impeding the ability of these institutions and their employees to provide services during this genocide. Whether it's coordination with the UN on schooling, whether it's enforcing law and order, whether it's clearing rubble, et cetera.

So Israel is interested in not only maintaining this political divide between Gaza and Ramallah, but by completely decimating the governance infrastructure in Gaza to prevent the ability of independent and autonomous self-rule to happen again after the genocide and the day after.

Yara Hawari 20:05

Right, and so in this way, this aid mechanism that uses US private security contractors could be a test run for what Israel envisions for the governance of Gaza. I mean, literally outsourcing governance to colonial actors.

Safa Joudeh 20:25

It is very possible. And again, Israel is not interested in having boots on the ground in Gaza and reoccupying or committing military forces to remain in Gaza.

It's costly, and it's not a popular option. And at the same time, having the PA reassume responsibility of administering Gaza would allow Palestinians in some way to form a unified sort of structure and begin to sort of build up that structure after years of division and collapse.

And so it appears that there's no interest in having a legitimate civilian administration to run Gaza. And this is where this experiment of outsourced,

privatized governance and security aid, but also in other sectors and spheres, comes in.

Yara Hawari 21:12

Thank you so much for joining me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

Safa Joudeh 21:18

Thank you, Yara.

Yara Hawari 21:24

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