



Date: 11/06/2025

Webinar- 20 Months of Genocide: The Role of the ‘Gaza Humanitarian Foundation’ and the Disappearance of the Madleen Boat Activists

Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK (AOHR UK) organised an urgent webinar titled [“20 Months of Genocide: The Role of the ‘Gaza Humanitarian Foundation’ and the Disappearance of the Madleen Boat Activists.”](#) The webinar aimed to expose the Israeli occupation’s weaponisation of humanitarian aid, the systematic starvation of Palestinians, and the illegal seizure of the Madleen humanitarian boat in international waters. With Gaza enduring an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe, this webinar brought together legal experts, UN officials, lawmakers, human rights defenders, and the families of detained activists to speak out against Israel’s crimes and the complicity of Western governments and institutions.

The webinar featured a powerful cross-section of international voices. Speakers included United Nations officials Pedro Arrojo-Agudo -Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, and Dr. Michael Fakhri - Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food; political figures such as Professor Richard Falk, Paul Murphy - Member of the Irish Parliament, and Benedetta Scuderi -Member of the European Parliament; human rights and policy experts Dr. Lex Takkenberg - Senior Advisor at ARDD and Clara Knaper Bohman - political scientist; and family members of Madleen boat passengers, including Katja Van Rennes, Lara Souza, and Sümeyra Akdeniz Ordu.

In his contribution, Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, provided a harrowing account of the catastrophic water and sanitation crisis imposed on the people of Gaza. He described the situation as inhumane, stressing that Israel publicly declared at the beginning of the war its intent to cut off water, food, and energy to civilians—an act that he linked



directly to the current suffering of over two million Palestinians. He highlighted the fact that the average Gazan now survives on just five litres of water per day—far below the World Health Organization’s emergency threshold of 15 litres, and a fraction of the 100 litres typically used per person elsewhere. Worse still, he warned, the little accessible water is often contaminated with faecal matter and salt, posing a severe health threat, especially to infants and children.

Arrojo-Agudo went on to explain that Gaza’s sole natural source of fresh water—the coastal aquifer—has been severely overexploited and polluted, primarily due to Israel’s 17-year blockade that has prevented the entry of 70% of materials needed to build proper sewage treatment facilities. These materials, classified as “dual use,” have been systematically denied, resulting in widespread groundwater contamination. He noted that even before the war, only 40% of the population had access to desalinated water or limited supplies sold by Israel. With the war’s outbreak, Israel cut off all water and power, collapsing desalination plants and exacerbating the crisis. As a result, he revealed, there have been 1.7 million cases of infectious diseases, including dysentery, hepatitis A, polio, and smallpox, primarily impacting children. He described this crisis as a “silent but lethal bomb.”

In closing, Arrojo-Agudo strongly condemned Israel’s actions as systematic violations of international law, citing the Fourth Geneva Convention, the Rome Statute, and customary international humanitarian law. He reiterated that the Rome Statute explicitly defines cutting off essential resources like food and medicine—and, crucially, water—as a crime of extermination. He stressed that the militarisation of water is not exclusive to Gaza but is a longstanding tool of territorial and water apartheid throughout the occupied Palestinian territories. Palestinians, he said, are denied access to the Jordan River, forbidden from building wells, and receive dramatically less water than Israeli settlers—who enjoy up to twenty times more for agriculture and even swimming pools. Arrojo-Agudo concluded with a firm declaration: “We are witnessing genocide against the Palestinian people, and I insist we cannot remain impassive.”



In his intervention, Dr. Michael Fakhri, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, contextualised the current situation in Gaza as part of a 25-year blockade imposed by Israel, stressing that half the population was already food insecure before the recent escalation. He traced the deliberate starvation campaign back to October 9, 2023, when Israel, in response to Hamas's actions, openly declared its intent to use starvation as a weapon. Fakhri described how, in the weeks that followed, Israel blocked all food aid into Gaza, targeting the north with particular intensity to forcibly displace Palestinians to the south. He made clear that this strategy has been systematic and deliberate, part of a long-term plan to depopulate northern Gaza. He emphasised that several UN Special Rapporteurs, including himself, have long referred to what is happening in Gaza as genocide and extermination—crimes against humanity. He underscored the historical significance of the International Criminal Court's issuance of arrest warrants against Netanyahu and Galant, marking the first time starvation has been prosecuted as a war crime.

Fakhri also addressed the establishment of the so-called "Gaza Humanitarian Foundation," revealing how this Israeli plan, announced in March and immediately condemned by every UN humanitarian agency including the Secretary-General, is nothing more than a tool of militarisation. He explained that Israel and the United States are using humanitarian aid as bait, funnelling desperate Palestinians toward distribution sites run by U.S. mercenaries and guarded by Israeli forces, turning these supposed aid zones into traps. He described these sites as "militarised traps," used not to provide aid but to humiliate, control, and depopulate Palestinians. He asserted that this entire campaign is not only an act of ethnic cleansing but also a calculated move to sideline the United Nations, which has the networks, convoys, and readiness to deliver aid effectively through agencies like UNRWA, WHO, and WFP. Israel's efforts, he warned, are aimed at dismantling international structures to facilitate full annexation of Gaza.

Turning to the Madleen aid boat and the broader Freedom Flotilla initiative, Fakhri praised the efforts of civilians who, in the face of government inaction, are risking their lives to uphold international law and break the illegal blockade. He described how the Madleen, flying a UK flag and carrying clearly declared humanitarian aid, was attacked



and seized by Israel in Palestinian territorial waters, an act he called illegal and unjustifiable. He noted that this followed a previous bombing of another flotilla boat by Israeli drones off the coast of Malta. Fakhri framed these civilian-led initiatives—including marches from Tunisia and Egypt—as legitimate, internationalist responses to genocide, and called on governments to support them actively. He urged the UN General Assembly to step in where the Security Council has failed, especially after the latest U.S. veto, and to send peacekeepers to accompany humanitarian convoys. “Why else do we have peacekeepers,” he asked, “if not to end genocide and end starvation?”

In his compelling intervention, Professor Richard A. Falk, Professor Emeritus of International Law, strongly echoed the previous speakers while directing sharp criticism at the international community’s complicity in Israel’s ongoing atrocities. He denounced Israel’s defiant conduct in Gaza, pointing out that its actions have continued unchecked due to the systematic obstruction of enforcement mechanisms at the United Nations—led principally by the United States and backed by liberal European democracies. Falk condemned what he called a “shameful episode” in the history of international normative behaviour, noting that countries which claim to uphold human rights and international law have, in fact, undermined those very principles since the onset of Israel’s occupation in 1967. This betrayal, he argued, has severely damaged the credibility and effectiveness of the UN system and exposed a dangerous “enforcement gap” that renders international law impotent in the face of geopolitical interests.

Falk emphasised that this void has forced civil society to step up where international institutions have failed. He endorsed growing calls for grassroots activism, including general strikes, arms embargoes, the suspension of Israel’s UN membership, and the formation of a Gaza Tribunal—a people-led initiative he is personally involved in. These actions, he explained, are not just expressions of solidarity but necessary steps to restore some measure of global justice. He drew parallels to past struggles such as the Vietnam anti-war movement and the global campaign against South African apartheid, both of which succeeded because of sustained, global popular pressure. Falk declared that the current genocide in Gaza represents “the moral challenge of



our time” and insisted that it demands a reinvigoration of political imagination and collective responsibility from the people of the world.

In closing, Falk laid bare the glaring hypocrisy in how international law is selectively applied. He contrasted the treatment of Israel with that of Russia in the Ukraine context, stating that international law has become nothing more than a political weapon used against adversaries, rather than a neutral system for regulating state conduct. He asserted that law loses all legitimacy when it is not applied equally to both the powerful and the weak. Falk expressed hope that the surging global solidarity with the Palestinian cause can evolve into a powerful and effective political movement—one that forces governments, especially in Europe and North America, to act decisively, to end the genocide, and to support the full liberation of the Palestinian people.

Clara Knaper Bohman, a political scientist specialising in research on the West Bank, began her remarks by denouncing the European Union’s longstanding diplomatic freeze on Gaza, initiated in 2007, which she said had completely failed to promote any form of Palestinian state-building, democratisation, or constructive political progress. She asserted that this approach had yielded no fruitful outcomes, exposing the hollowness of EU strategy towards the Palestinian cause. Clara then shifted to the topic of civil society resistance, praising the Freedom Flotilla and Greta Thunberg—speaking also from her perspective as a Swedish citizen. She warned that civil society, especially Palestinian solidarity movements, are under attack not just in Israel but across Europe and beyond, where dissent is being systematically silenced and opposition voices are increasingly repressed.

She expressed concern over the fate of the Freedom Flotilla activists, including those who had landed in France and Greta Thunberg, who was reportedly en route back to Sweden. Clara stressed that these individuals must be seen not just as passengers on a boat, but as part of a broader struggle to defend shrinking civic spaces worldwide. She cited statements from the Swedish Red Cross and condemned the Israeli government’s claims that UN Secretary-General António Guterres is antisemitic as a justification for denying UN access to Gaza. Instead, she called for urgent



strengthening of international institutions like the UN, which she argued have a clear structure for delivering humanitarian aid—structures currently bypassed in favour of chaos, militarised aid operations, and severe violations of international law, including the targeting and shooting of civilians and the weaponisation of humanitarian distribution.

Clara concluded by highlighting that 70% of those killed in Gaza are women and children, emphasising that such attacks on civilians are blatant violations of international humanitarian law and must stop immediately. She criticised the reliance on private actors to manage aid distribution, declaring it an unworkable and dangerous model, and reiterated the urgent need to allow institutions like the Red Cross and the UN access to the besieged population. Drawing a chilling parallel with historical genocides, she spoke of how Israeli ministers have used dehumanising rhetoric—comparing Palestinians to animals and denying them even basic sustenance like wheat. She warned that this dehumanisation has now reached an unbearable stage. Civil society, she said, must step up in response, and she commended the Freedom Flotilla for exemplifying what solidarity in action looks like.

Dr. Lex Takkenberg, Senior Advisor at ARDD and a veteran humanitarian with decades of experience at UNRWA, opened his remarks by endorsing the insights shared by earlier speakers, particularly Dr. Michael Fakhri's analysis of the so-called Gaza Humanitarian Foundation as a weaponised aid scheme serving Israel's broader policy of forced displacement. He asserted that the foundation is not a genuine humanitarian initiative, but rather a strategic political instrument designed to reinforce Israel's starvation campaign and justify the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from northern Gaza—potentially setting the stage for further expulsion into Egypt or beyond. Dr. Takkenberg also described the Foundation as a calculated tool to ease political pressure from the United States, especially from former President Trump, who was reportedly disturbed by the international images of starving children. He argued that the Foundation was cynically introduced as a pacifier to buy political time for Israel and deflect demands for a ceasefire.



Dr. Takkenberg warned that this project is part of a broader campaign to dismantle and replace the existing UN-led humanitarian system. Drawing on his deep knowledge of the sector, he recalled a similar failed initiative—FOGBO, a pseudo-humanitarian structure backed by the U.S. and Switzerland—that collapsed quickly, much like the current Foundation is expected to do. He stated bluntly that the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation is structurally flawed and will soon fail, merely delaying inevitable political accountability. Meanwhile, Israel has been systematically dismantling UN operations on the ground. Over 300 humanitarian workers have been killed, including more than 220 of his former UNRWA colleagues. He detailed Israel's baseless accusations against UNRWA, attempts to link the agency to Hamas, and the passing of two Knesset laws aimed at banning and crippling the agency—particularly in East Jerusalem and Gaza. These, he noted, are not isolated moves but part of a long-running effort to erase Palestinian infrastructure and international oversight.

Turning to the financial crisis facing UNRWA, Dr. Takkenberg stressed that the situation is becoming dire. Beyond the targeted killings and infrastructure destruction, UNRWA is facing an existential funding shortfall. He warned that by next month, the agency may be unable to pay its staff, threatening services not only in Gaza and the West Bank, but also in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. He reminded the audience that this is not a new crisis, but part of an escalating pattern of neglect and attack on the only UN agency dedicated to Palestinian refugees. In his closing, he called not only for an end to the genocide and an immediate ceasefire, but also for governments worldwide to urgently recommit to UNRWA's survival. Without this, he warned, millions of Palestinians will lose access to basic services at the darkest time in their history.

Paul Murphy, Member of Parliament for People Before Profit in Ireland, delivered a forceful condemnation of Israel's use of both starvation and humanitarian aid as deliberate weapons in its genocidal war on the Palestinian people. He stated unequivocally that what is unfolding in Gaza is not only a campaign of ethnic cleansing and genocide, but that aid itself has now been transformed into an instrument of that campaign. Murphy described how Israel has seized complete control over the distribution of aid, reduced it to a "pathetic, entirely inadequate trickle," and is using it to forcibly displace Palestinians into concentrated zones, only to attack them while



they queue in desperation for food. He highlighted the horrific toll, noting that over 600 Palestinians have been killed or seriously injured at supposed aid distribution centres, which he described as “slaughter points” designed to further terrorise and punish the population.

Murphy contrasted the horror of this engineered humanitarian crisis with the courage and initiative shown by ordinary citizens around the world, particularly those participating in the Freedom Flotilla and the planned March to Gaza. He praised these grassroots actions as examples of true international solidarity, standing in sharp opposition to the continued complicity of Western governments. According to Murphy, the genocide in Gaza is “made in America” and “made in the European Union,” backed and sustained through Western arms, funding, and political cover. While some leaders have issued tepid words of criticism, he stressed that material support for Israel’s military campaign has never ceased. The hypocrisy, he noted, is staggering—and the divide between public outrage and official policy has never been more glaring.

In his closing, Murphy issued a rallying cry to people across the globe to take direct action. He said the responsibility lies with ordinary citizens to “break the siege, break the blockade of Gaza,” and to ensure that aid reaches Palestinians without being manipulated or weaponised. He called for an end to his own government’s role in the crisis, demanding the immediate severing of all forms of support for Israel’s actions. He reaffirmed that true solidarity with Palestine means not just condemnation, but resistance to genocide and complicity alike.

Benedetta Scuderi, Member of the European Parliament from Italy, delivered a passionate and scathing critique of the European Union’s complicity in Israel’s genocide against the Palestinian people. She began by expressing her deep disappointment and anger at the failure of both the European Commission and the European Parliament to condemn or act against Israel’s atrocities. Scuderi underscored that while EU officials speak vaguely of the need to “solve the situation,” they have categorically failed to take any concrete measures to halt the Netanyahu government’s campaign of genocide and ethnic cleansing. She demanded immediate action—including halting the EU-Israel Association Agreement, imposing sanctions on



Israeli officials including Netanyahu, and enacting a full arms embargo on Israel. She criticised the EU for failing to use its considerable political and economic leverage, calling the inaction a form of betrayal and a dangerous precedent.

Reflecting on her recent visit to the Rafah crossing, Scuderi described witnessing a humanitarian system in complete collapse. She said UN agencies and aid workers were in despair as humanitarian convoys remained blocked at the border, and she warned that what is happening in Gaza is not just genocide, but the destruction of the very foundation of international humanitarian law and multilateral cooperation. She emphasised that if the international community allows Israel to militarise aid, deport populations under the guise of humanitarian relief, and strip the UN of its authority, then it is not only the Palestinians who are at risk—but the credibility and functionality of the entire global humanitarian order. She warned that once this system is delegitimised, the international community will lose the moral and legal authority to speak out against future atrocities elsewhere.

Scuderi also condemned Israel's illegal seizure of the Madleen aid ship in international waters, calling it a blatant violation of maritime and international law. She revealed that among the passengers was a fellow Member of the European Parliament—now illegally detained by Israel for the sole act of attempting to deliver aid to a starving population. Despite this, she noted with outrage, neither the President of the European Commission nor the President of the European Parliament has issued a single statement demanding the MEP's release. In response, over 40 MEPs signed a letter to the Commission within hours, calling for action. Statements were also issued by the S&D, the Greens, and The Left. Still, she said, Europe remains paralysed. Scuderi called out her own government—the Italian government—for its complicity, citing its vote against reviewing the EU-Israel agreement. She concluded with a call to escalate both institutional and grassroots pressure, referencing the 300,000-strong pro-Palestine march in Rome and vowing to continue the fight both inside and outside the European institutions until justice is achieved and the genocide is brought to an end.

Some of the most powerful and distressing moments of the webinar came from the family members of the Freedom Flotilla passengers, who were abducted by Israeli



forces in international waters and remain in detention. Katja Van Rennes, sister of Dutch activist Marco Van Rennes, spoke of the confusion, fear, and silence that has clouded every moment since the Madleen was intercepted. Despite brief phone contact and confirmation that her brother had been moved to a prison, she criticised the shocking inaction of the Dutch government, which has yet to issue any public statement. "You would think they would stand up for their citizens," she said, but instead, they remain silent—"incredibly scared to do so." What disturbed her most was the public perception—how simply standing in solidarity with Gaza has been twisted by some into an accusation of supporting terrorism. "Everybody can see that it is not okay," she said, yet fear keeps people from speaking out.

From Brazil, Lara Souza, wife of Tiago—another passenger on board the Madleen—joined the webinar visibly shaken, having just received updates from her husband's lawyer. She had still not been able to speak to him directly since the interception, recounting how even the Brazilian embassy was denied permission to connect them. She confirmed that Tiago was among those who refused to sign the deportation papers, choosing instead to remain detained so that the truth could be spoken. Four others signed, strategically, in order to speak to the press and expose what had happened. Lara firmly stated that what occurred was not just a legal violation, but a political crime: "They were attacked in international waters, near Palestinian territory, with full legal authorisation to sail, under UK flags, carrying humanitarian aid. This is not a crime. This is what governments should be doing." She called for global pressure to bring the detainees home and for recognition of the Madleen as a symbol of civilian defiance in the face of political cowardice.

Sümeýra Akdeniz Ordu, wife of Turkish activist Shuayeb, delivered a heart-wrenching contribution, her voice trembling as she described the trauma of witnessing her husband's abduction live through the ship's security camera. Shuayeb, she explained, had installed the camera system himself, and it was through this same lens that she watched him be taken by armed Israeli soldiers. Sümeýra managed to convey what no language barrier could obscure—the agony of waiting, the deliberate cruelty of prolonged detention, and the intimidation designed to exhaust families into silence. She called the detention a calculated act of psychological warfare, extending not just



to the detainees, but to their families. “They want to make the process longer, so not everybody could come home,” she said, echoing the collective fear shared by all the relatives: that behind legal delays and silence lies a strategy of erasure.

Together, these women gave a human face to what Israel hopes to obscure—an international crime committed not in secrecy, but in full view of the world. Their stories were not just pleas for updates, but urgent demands for accountability, protection, and truth. In their voices, the brutality of the blockade became personal, and the political became heartbreakingly intimate.

Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK