

GIOR | GLOBAL INFLUENCE OPERATIONS REPORT

The Gaza Information Trap: How Hamas Coercion Shapes What the West Knows

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Executive Summary

Between 2018 and 2022, Hamas built a coercive system that filtered humanitarian data at its source, intimidated journalists and civil society, and constrained UN staff, creating a structural disinformation environment in which information appears neutral by the time it reaches Western audiences. Independently verified reporting from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and UN agencies document systematic torture of critics, the mass detention of over 1,000 people during the 2019 crackdown, repeated arrests of journalists, explicit UN statements that Gaza casualty figures “cannot be independently verified,” and UNRWA’s own finding that staff fear prevents misconduct reporting. NGO Monitor’s allegations—while not independently authenticated—describe additional control mechanisms such as a “guarantor system” and survey censorship. Together, these constraints prevent independent verification and ensure that humanitarian data exported to the West reflects a filtered and highly restricted information environment.

1. The Repressive Environment

The control architecture operates within a repressive environment documented by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International through independent field investigations between 2018 and 2022. This evidence does not depend on Israeli government sources or NGO Monitor's analysis.

Human Rights Watch: Systematic Torture as Policy

Human Rights Watch's October 2018 report, "Two Authorities, One Way, Zero Dissent," was based on 147 interviews, including 48 former Gaza detainees [\[1\]](#). The organization concluded that Hamas authorities "routinely arrest and torture peaceful critics and opponents with impunity." Documented torture methods included forcing detainees into stress positions for extended periods, positional torture including suspension by wrists, and beatings with cables, hoses, and batons.

HRW's assessment was unequivocal: "The routine practice of torture using similar tactics over years with no action taken by senior officials... makes these practices systematic. They also indicate that torture is governmental policy." This finding was based on consistent patterns across dozens of independent interviews, not on documents or claims from any single source.

The March 2019 Crackdown

The "We Want to Live" protests in March 2019 produced the most concentrated crackdown during the study period. According to the Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR), an independent Palestinian body, Hamas detained over 1,000 Palestinians in a matter of days [\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#). Amnesty International documented arrests of at least 13 activists at a private planning meeting on March 10, 2019, stormed by security forces without arrest warrants [\[3\]](#).

The crackdown specifically targeted human rights infrastructure. Staff from Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights, Palestinian Center for Human Rights, Al Dameer Association, and the ICHR itself were detained and beaten. Amnesty's own Research Consultant, Hind Khoudary, was detained and interrogated for three hours on March 18, 2019, subjected to ill-treatment by four male interrogators, and threatened with prosecution for "spying and working as a foreign agent" [\[3\]](#). This direct targeting of human rights monitors illustrates how Hamas neutralizes independent verification capacity.

Individual Cases: The Cost of Critical Speech

Individual cases documented by HRW reveal patterns of sustained harassment that extend across the study period. Abdullah Abu Sharekh, a 55-year-old UNRWA math teacher, was arrested four times between January 2017 and January 2018 for Facebook criticism, forced to provide his password under threat of six-month detention [\[1\]](#). Journalist Muhammad Othman left Gaza entirely two months after his detention, stating: "I do not want to live in a place where I am constantly harassed" [\[1\]](#). This exodus of critical voices represents an unmeasured but significant information loss- the people most likely to provide independent accounts are systematically driven from the territory or into silence.

2. Press Freedom Constraints

The Committee to Protect Journalists documented specific cases of journalist detention during 2018–2022, providing independently verified evidence of press constraints.

Hani al-Agha (September 2019): Arrested for "reporting on declining standards of living in the Gaza Strip, which al-Agha had blamed on poor governance by Hamas" [\[4\]](#).

Bassam Mohammad Moheisen (October 2019): Arrested for social media posts supporting President Abbas [\[4\]](#).

Alaa al-Mashrawi (October 2021): Detained 78 days on unknown charges after Hamas officers seized laptops, phones, and work documents [\[5\]](#)[\[6\]](#).

Al-Arabiya and Al-Hadath, Saudi-funded networks, were banned entirely from Gaza in July 2020 after reporting on a Hamas naval commander's alleged defection to Israel. CPJ stated: "By censoring news outlets and banning journalists from working for them, Hamas authorities in Gaza seem intent on leaving no room for views other than their own" [\[7\]](#).

Western Media Constraints: First-Hand Accounts

Matti Friedman, a former Associated Press correspondent in the Jerusalem bureau (2006–2011), provided a detailed first-hand account of operational pressures in a 2014 Atlantic essay [\[8\]](#). Friedman wrote that he "was informed by the bureau's senior editors that our Palestinian reporter in Gaza couldn't possibly provide critical coverage of Hamas because doing so would put him in danger."

Friedman documented specific incidents: armed Hamas militants entered the AP's Gaza office to complain about a photo revealing a rocket launch location, yet the AP declined to report the intimidation itself. He described how cameramen waiting outside Shifa Hospital would film civilian casualties and then, at a signal from officials, turn off their cameras when fighters arrived.

Important caveat: The AP disputed Friedman's characterizations but acknowledged that "armed militants entered the AP's offices in Gaza to complain about a photo showing the location of a specific rocket launch" and that "such intimidation is common in trouble spots" [\[8\]](#). The dispute concerns interpretation rather than the underlying facts of intimidation.

3. UN Verification Limitations

The UN's own documentation acknowledges verification limitations while simultaneously transmitting Gaza-sourced data to global audiences. These acknowledgments appear in official UN publications and do not depend on external analysis.

OCHA Verification Disclaimers

UN OCHA explicitly states in its "Reported Impact" documentation that "Figures that are yet to be verified by the UN are attributed to their source. Casualty numbers have been provided by the Ministry of Health or the Government Media Office in Gaza" [\[9\]](#). A Washington Institute analysis found that OCHA "does not generate or check" Gaza fatality data—it "merely relays statistics" from Hamas-run institutions [\[10\]](#). Unlike in previous conflicts, "neither OCHA nor local and international NGOs are currently conducting real-time fatality verification" [\[10\]](#).

The Colonna Report: UNRWA's Own Assessment

The UNRWA Colonna Report (April 2024) is an independent review commissioned by the UN itself following concerns about neutrality and documented systemic vulnerabilities in Gaza operations [11]. The report found that "the volatile context and security challenges may prevent reporting of allegations and investigating at the local level" and that "field office investigators in Gaza risk their personal security."

Critically, the review noted that Gaza—despite being UNRWA's largest field office—reported zero neutrality cases in 2022, raising questions about whether staff fear suppressed reporting [11]. The report documented concrete Hamas incursions into UNRWA facilities between 2020–2022:

2020: One incursion by Hamas; discovery of "a hand grenade and a military vest inside an UNRWA school."

2021: Four Hamas incursions; "two tunnels" discovered and filled; "one instance of threats from Hamas directed at senior UNRWA management."

2022: Eight Hamas incursions; "a large cavity was discovered under an UNRWA school."

Regarding staff vetting, the Colonna Report concluded that existing measures "do not allow sufficient verifications" and that "UNRWA lacks the support of intelligence services to undertake efficient and comprehensive vetting" [11]. Staff unions were characterized as subject to "long-standing concerns over politicization and interlinkages with Palestinian political factions," with "intimidation tactics and threats" forcing "numerous UNRWA directors to be transferred to different positions and contexts for their own security."

4. Alleged Control Mechanisms: The NGO Monitor Documents

Source caveat: The following section draws on NGO Monitor's December 2025 report, which analyzes documents reportedly from Hamas's Interior Security Mechanism. These documents were captured by the IDF and declassified by the IDF. The original Arabic documents have not been made publicly available. Independent authentication is not possible. Several named NGOs have disputed the report's characterizations. This material is presented as *allegations requiring further verification*, not as established fact.

The Alleged Guarantor System

According to NGO Monitor's analysis, a December 14, 2022 ISM document allegedly names 55 individuals serving as guarantors across 48 NGOs, with Hamas requiring that these liaisons "hold senior administrative positions, such as director, deputy director, or board chair" [12]. The same document allegedly states that guarantors "can be exploited for security purposes in order to infiltrate foreign associations, their foreign senior personnel and their movements."

NGO Monitor reports that the ISM allegedly classified NGOs by cooperation level, with organizations designated "cooperating" including Islamic Relief UK, while those labeled "not cooperating"—allegedly including Save the Children, Catholic Relief Services, and Doctors Without Borders Belgium/France—faced documented retaliation [\[12\]](#).

Alleged Survey Censorship

NGO Monitor reports that an ISM internal memo documented Hamas ordering redaction of 13 survey questions from an Oxfam assessment (post-May 2021) because "the respondent could possibly mention matters that concern the resistance's activity" [\[12\]](#). A separate July 2020 memo allegedly ordered the deletion of questions from a Mercy Corps questionnaire, citing "concerns that the goal [of the question] is to identify resistance members."

Organizational responses: Several organizations named in the NGO Monitor report have disputed its characterizations. International Medical Corps, MAP-UK, Norwegian Refugee Council, and Oxfam have issued denials or contested the report's framing [\[13\]\[14\]](#). These disputes concern both the authenticity of the underlying documents and the interpretation of their contents.

Analytical note: If the NGO Monitor allegations are accurate, they would provide specific mechanisms—the guarantor system, survey censorship, coordinated intimidation—that explain how the repressive environment documented by HRW and Amnesty translates into data distortion. However, the allegations cannot be independently verified, and the core thesis of this report does not depend on their accuracy.

5. The Structural Disinformation Mechanism

The independently verified evidence—HRW torture documentation, Amnesty crackdown reporting, CPJ journalist arrests, Colonna Report findings, and OCHA verification disclaimers—establishes a consistent pattern: coercion operates at the point of data collection, not downstream messaging.

The mechanism operates through identifiable stages: First, independent monitors and critics face arrest, torture, and forced exile—documented extensively by HRW. Second, journalists face detention for critical coverage—documented by CPJ with named cases and dates. Third, UN staff report being unable to investigate misconduct due to security fears—documented in the UN's own commissioned review. Fourth, casualty and needs data come from Hamas-controlled institutions—acknowledged in OCHA's own disclaimers. Fifth, this data is transmitted to Western audiences as "UN" or "humanitarian" information without disclosure of the verification constraints.

The structural nature of this disinformation means traditional fact-checking is insufficient. When a survey never asks questions that might reveal inconvenient

information—whether due to the censorship NGO Monitor alleges or simply due to the chilling effect HRW and Amnesty document—the resulting data contains no lies, merely engineered omissions. When casualty figures come from institutions operating in an environment where criticism leads to detention, the numbers arrive with the appearance of objectivity while embodying undisclosed methodological constraints.

What Cannot Be Known

The evidence gaps are significant and must be explicitly acknowledged. We cannot independently verify the specific mechanisms (guarantor lists, survey censorship memos) that NGO Monitor alleges. We cannot quantify how much data distortion occurs—we can only document that conditions making distortion likely exist. We cannot access the perspectives of current Gaza-based aid workers who might face retaliation for speaking critically. The very constraints this report documents prevent the collection of evidence that would fully establish their scope.

6. Implications for Western Policymaking

The documented patterns reveal that Western governments, media, and institutions receive Gaza-sourced information through a pipeline in which independent verification is structurally prevented. The question for policymakers is not whether individual data points are "true" but whether the data collection environment permits the generation of inconvenient truths.

Three structural reforms could address the verification collapse:

Independent verification requirements: Major donors could require third-party casualty and needs verification as a condition of funding, restoring practices that occurred in previous conflicts but have since lapsed.

Transparency on methodology: UN agencies could explicitly disclose not just that figures are unverified but the specific ways in which verification is prevented.

Protection for whistleblowers: Institutionalizing channels for aid workers to report constraints could generate alternative information flows outside Hamas-controlled systems.

The fundamental insight is that information warfare can operate more sophisticatedly than simply producing propaganda: by controlling who collects data, constraining what questions get asked, and ensuring that staff cannot report freely, an actor ensures that even adversarial Western institutions become transmission belts for constrained information. The humanitarian data that reaches policymakers may be accurate within its terms, but it has been filtered through a system designed to exclude what the controlling authority does not want known.

Conclusion

This investigation establishes, through independently verifiable sources, that Hamas operates a repressive environment where critics face systematic torture, journalists face detention for unfavorable coverage, human rights monitors are specifically targeted, and UN staff fear reporting misconduct. Separately, UN agencies acknowledge that they cannot independently verify Gaza-sourced casualty data and that conditions prevent normal oversight functions.

These two findings are sufficient to conclude that information reaching Western audiences from Gaza has passed through a filter whose constraints are not disclosed to end users. The NGO Monitor allegations, if accurate, would provide specific mechanisms explaining this filtering—but the core conclusion does not depend on their verification.

Western institutions relying on Gaza-sourced humanitarian data should treat such information as operating under conditions of coercion, apply appropriate skepticism, and invest in independent verification mechanisms. The absence of blatant falsehoods does not indicate the absence of structural distortion.

Note: Evidence Tiers and Source Evaluation

This investigation draws on two distinct tiers of evidence, each with different verification characteristics. Readers should weigh claims accordingly.

Tier 1 (Independently Verifiable): Human Rights Watch field investigations based on 147 interviews, including 48 former detainees; Amnesty International documentation, including direct testimony from their own detained staff member; Committee to Protect Journalists case documentation with named journalists and verified detention dates; the UN-commissioned Colonna Report on UNRWA neutrality; and UN OCHA's own published verification disclaimers. These sources underwent independent editorial and methodological review processes and do not depend on any single organizational perspective.

Tier 2 (Requires Caveat): NGO Monitor's December 2025 report "Puppet Regime: Hamas' Coercive Grip on Aid and NGO Operations in Gaza," which analyzes 48 pages of Arabic-language documents reportedly from the Gaza Interior Security Mechanism, spanning 2018–2022 and declassified by the Israel Defense Forces. The provenance chain—Hamas internal files → captured by IDF → declassified by IDF → analyzed by NGO Monitor—means independent authentication is not possible. The original Arabic documents have not been published. Several named NGOs (MAP-UK, Human Appeal, CIVITAS, International Medical Corps, Mercy Corps, Oxfam) have denied the allegations or disputed the report's characterizations. NGO Monitor is a Jerusalem-based organization that describes itself as promoting accountability in the NGO sector; critics characterize it as aligned with Israeli government perspectives.

Analytical approach: This report presents Tier 1 evidence as the load-bearing framework for its conclusions. Tier 2 material is introduced with explicit source attribution and treated as corroborating rather than foundational. The core thesis—that Hamas operates a repressive environment constraining information collection, and that UN agencies acknowledge verification limitations—rests entirely on Tier 1 evidence.

Reference List

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- [3] Amnesty International, "Gaza: Hamas Must End Brutal Crackdown Against Protesters and Rights Defenders" (March 18, 2019). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/03/gaza-hamas-must-end-brutal-crackdown-against-protesters-and-rights-defenders/>
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- [6] PEN America, Alaa al-Mashrawi case documentation (2021). <https://pen.org/writer-at-risk/alaa-al-mashrawi/>
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- [8] Matti Friedman, "What the Media Gets Wrong About Israel," The Atlantic (November 30, 2014). <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/11/how-the-media-makes-the-israel-story/383262/>

[9] UN OCHA, "Reported Impact Snapshot | Gaza Strip" (example: November 5, 2025). <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/reported-impact-snapshot-gaza-strip-5-november-2025>

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[11] Catherine Colonna et al., "Independent Review of Mechanisms and Procedures to Ensure Adherence by UNRWA to the Humanitarian Principle of Neutrality" (April 20, 2024). https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/unrwa_independent_review_on_neutrality.pdf

[12] NGO Monitor, "Puppet Regime: Hamas' Coercive Grip on Aid and NGO Operations in Gaza" (December 2025). *Note: Based on documents reportedly from Hamas ISM, captured and declassified by IDF. Original Arabic documents not publicly available. Multiple named NGOs have disputed the report.* <https://ngo-monitor.org/reports/puppet-regime-hamas-ngo-gaza/>

[13] Jewish News Syndicate, "Declassified files expose Hamas's grip on NGOs in Gaza" (December 5, 2025). <https://www.jns.org/declassified-files-expose-hamass-grip-on-ngos-in-gaza/>

[14] Novi Zhukovsky, "'Puppet Regime': Internal Documents Lay Bare Hamas's Grip on Major Aid Groups," The New York Sun (December 4, 2025). <https://www.nysun.com/article/puppet-regime-internal-documents-lay-bare-hamass-grip-on-major-aid-groups>