

## Unlike Airdrops, Maritime Aid Corridors Can Actually Help Gaza

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**Two nascent sea corridors could augment land routes and help Gaza return to or even exceed prewar aid levels—though internal distribution challenges still need to be resolved.**

On March 18, the World Health Organization [called on \(https://www.who.int/news/item/18-03-2024-famine-in-gaza-is-imminent-with-immediate-and-long-term-health-consequences\)](https://www.who.int/news/item/18-03-2024-famine-in-gaza-is-imminent-with-immediate-and-long-term-health-consequences) the international community to “restore humanitarian access to the entire Gaza Strip” by a “sustained supply of sufficient aid commodities,” including food, medicine, and fuel. It also noted that this aid should “enter and move throughout the entire Gaza Strip by road.” While modalities for expanded ground supply are being worked out, the United States and [various partners \(https://jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-us-air-drop-aid-war-torn-gaza-strip%C2%A0\)](https://jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-us-air-drop-aid-war-torn-gaza-strip%C2%A0)—Bahrain, Britain, Egypt, France, Jordan, Oman, the Netherlands, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—have executed airdrops and are taking steps to establish a maritime aid corridor. Critics generally describe non-ground modes of relief as ineffective or insufficient. Yet closer examination reveals that a maritime corridor is vastly superior to airdrops and could make a substantial humanitarian impact.

### Humanitarian Assistance by the Numbers

Quantifying aid requirements during a conflict is difficult, but a spokesman for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) [recently estimated \(https://www.npr.org/2024/02/21/1232605200/humanitarian-aid-gaza-israel\)](https://www.npr.org/2024/02/21/1232605200/humanitarian-aid-gaza-israel) that Gaza needs 500 truckloads per day (which presumably includes all types of aid), asserting that this is the same quantity the territory was receiving before the war. Last month, the World Food Programme (WFP) [estimated \(https://www.wfp.org/news/famine-imminent-northern-gaza-new-report-warns\)](https://www.wfp.org/news/famine-imminent-northern-gaza-new-report-warns) that 300 truckloads of food alone are required daily. In 2022, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [counted \(https://www.ochaopt.org/content/movement-and-out-gaza-2022\)](https://www.ochaopt.org/content/movement-and-out-gaza-2022) a total of 106,449 trucks transporting all types of goods into Gaza, 25 percent of them carrying food. This works out to around 300 trucks per day, or 73 per day if one counts only the food deliveries.

As of March 25, the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories, an Israeli agency, [stated \(https://govextra.gov.il/cogat/humanitarian-efforts/home/\)](https://govextra.gov.il/cogat/humanitarian-efforts/home/) that just over 18,500 trucks had entered Gaza since the start of the war last October, almost 70 percent of them carrying food; UNRWA [reported \(https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrJoiZTVkYmEwNmMtZWYxNy00ODhlLWI2ZjctNjIzMzQ5OGQxNzY5IiwidCI6IjI2MmY2YTQxLTlwZTktNDE0MC04ZDNiLWZkZjVIZWNiNDE1NyIsImMiOiJl9&pageName=Report\)](https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrJoiZTVkYmEwNmMtZWYxNy00ODhlLWI2ZjctNjIzMzQ5OGQxNzY5IiwidCI6IjI2MmY2YTQxLTlwZTktNDE0MC04ZDNiLWZkZjVIZWNiNDE1NyIsImMiOiJl9&pageName=Report) around 17,400 trucks over the same period. Both agencies’ numbers are updated daily and will differ from these figures by publication time, but the general conclusion is the same—COGAT and UNRWA agree that around 100 trucks per day have been carrying food, water, and other aid into Gaza during the war.

When assessing the total aid requirements issued by various agencies, one must bear in mind conflicting wartime realities. On one hand, it is unreasonable to expect that deliveries of nonessential items that may fall under the “aid” label (e.g., construction materials, industrial/electrical appliances) will remain the same in the middle of a war. On the other hand, Gaza may need more of certain crucial items in wartime, such as medical supplies, fuel, and water. For example, 97 percent of Gazans relied on an [unregulated \(https://www.reuters.com/graphics/ISRAEL-PALESTINIANS/MAPS/movajdladpa/#water-is-running-out-in-gaza\)](https://www.reuters.com/graphics/ISRAEL-PALESTINIANS/MAPS/movajdladpa/#water-is-running-out-in-gaza) indigenous water production and distribution network prior to October 7. This system has presumably been compromised by combat operations despite efforts to keep it functional. Consequently, some water must now enter by truck.

### Airdrops Are Not a Viable Option

Between March 2 and March 15, the U.S. Air Force conducted [thirteen missions \(https://www.airandspaceforces.com/us-air-force-c-17s-gaza-aid-airdrops/\)](https://www.airandspaceforces.com/us-air-force-c-17s-gaza-aid-airdrops/) in which C-17s and C-130s dropped pallets of food and water into Gaza. Other countries have conducted airdrop missions as well. Whatever immediate benefits these missions may have had at their drop zones, their overall impact is minimal when one calculates how much aid can be delivered by airdrop.

In the case of U.S. drops, a precise calculation is difficult because the number of planes involved in each flight is unknown, and because the military generally reports such deliveries in terms of how many meals-ready-to-eat (MREs) are dropped rather than total weight. Yet military sources [report \(https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle-east/2024-03-18/al-udeid-gaza-aid-13355432.html\)](https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle-east/2024-03-18/al-udeid-gaza-aid-13355432.html) that individual aid pallets weigh 1,200 pounds when packed with food and over 2,000 pounds when packed with water, meaning that three C-17s are required to transport a payload equivalent to a typical twenty-foot truck container. Therefore, it is unlikely that U.S. airdrops contributed more than one truckload of aid per day. (The C-17 has an [astounding capacity \(https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/1529726/c-17-globemaster-iii/\)](https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/1529726/c-17-globemaster-iii/) of 170,900 pounds but can only hold around a quarter of this amount when carrying palletized aid, which is much less dense than, say, a tank and can only be packed so much before exceeding parachute limits.) The inefficiency of airdrops is compounded by the inclusion of [nonessential items \(https://www.dla.mil/Portals/104/Documents/TroopSupport/Subsistence/Rations/MRE/MRE43\\_P\\_F\\_Menu.pdf\)](https://www.dla.mil/Portals/104/Documents/TroopSupport/Subsistence/Rations/MRE/MRE43_P_F_Menu.pdf) in many MREs, not to mention the high operating cost  [\(https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/documents/rates/fy2022/2022\\_b\\_c.pdf\)](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/documents/rates/fy2022/2022_b_c.pdf) of C-17s making the long round trip from al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar (around \$16,000 per hour).

Airdrops can create safety and ethical hazards as well. On March 8, the Hamas-run Ministry of Health [reported \(https://abcnews.go.com/International/gaza-children-killed-humanitarian-aid-airdrop/story?id=107927556\)](https://abcnews.go.com/International/gaza-children-killed-humanitarian-aid-airdrop/story?id=107927556) that five children were killed when an aid pallet’s parachute malfunctioned. The United States did not refute this claim but emphasized that no fatalities had resulted from its airdrops, implying that the incident involved drops by another nation. On March 27, twelve Palestinians reportedly [drowned \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/aid-drop-off-gaza-beach-leads-drownings-local-authorities-say-2024-03-26/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/aid-drop-off-gaza-beach-leads-drownings-local-authorities-say-2024-03-26/) while trying to retrieve aid dropped offshore.

Even when aid is dropped safely, the absence of a military ground control party at the drop zone makes it nearly impossible to determine if the delivery is recovered by responsible parties. At worst, these drops may have supplied Hamas or been diverted by war profiteers. At best, they [exacerbate the disorder \(https://youtu.be/jSMCd40uUJc?si=I6Bkeh8cQrHXzUV5\)](https://youtu.be/jSMCd40uUJc?si=I6Bkeh8cQrHXzUV5) experienced by noncombatants during war and principally benefit the fastest and strongest among a suffering population.

### Two Promising Maritime Options

Although maritime options include challenges with shoreside distribution and take time to develop, directly delivering aid to Gaza by sea will bring much more meaningful quantities of aid than airdrops. Currently, around 1,000 U.S. military personnel are [en route \(https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/navy-ships/a60190821/the-army-yes-the-army-is-sailing-a-fleet-to-build-a-port-off-gaza/\)](https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/navy-ships/a60190821/the-army-yes-the-army-is-sailing-a-fleet-to-build-a-port-off-gaza/) to the East Mediterranean to establish a “joint logistics over the shore” capability that could begin delivering [as much as \(https://www.cbsnews.com/news/maritime-corridor-construction-gaza-aid-us-military/\)](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/maritime-corridor-construction-gaza-aid-us-military/) two million meals per day by the end of this month. Given Gaza’s lack of a deepwater port, the operation will require construction of a floating pier around five miles offshore and an 1,800-foot causeway extending from the shore out into the sea. Large cargo ships will offload at the pier, and smaller vessels will then ferry the cargo to the causeway.

Additionally, a private American firm, Fogbow, has been developing a separate commercial maritime corridor. These shipments will [reportedly \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-allies-eye-commercial-maritime-option-gaza-aid-2024-03-12/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-allies-eye-commercial-maritime-option-gaza-aid-2024-03-12/) originate in Cyprus, delivering the equivalent of 200 truckloads of aid per day to Gaza at a cost of \$200 million for six months, including construction and operation—a supply rate that would more than double the current flow. This commercial option could be operational within a month of being funded, though to date there is no news of any government or international organization footing the bill.

Both the Fogbow and U.S. military options would unload in northern Gaza, bringing aid directly into the area that the World Health Organization considers [most at risk \(https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/alerts-archive/issue-97/en/\)](https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/alerts-archive/issue-97/en/) of famine. This placement would also avoid the logistical and criminal hazards of ground transport from southern Gaza.

So far, neither operation has confirmed who will be responsible for onshore distribution, but this aspect will ultimately be handled by one agent or another, enabling more orderly distribution than airdrops. In addition, the shoreside distribution agents may ultimately be responsible for more than half of all aid entering Gaza, giving them substantial influence with Palestinians and the international community. As a private entity, Fogbow will have more latitude to choose its partner than the U.S. military. If selected judiciously, these partnerships could sow the economic seeds for a more accountable and responsible Palestinian leadership in the future.

Of course, distribution agents will be vulnerable and tempting targets for Hamas and other malign actors if shoreside security is inadequate. The Israel Defense Forces have pledged to [provide security \(https://www.politico.com/news/2024/03/26/israel-security-gaza-pier-project-00149214\)](https://www.politico.com/news/2024/03/26/israel-security-gaza-pier-project-00149214) for the U.S. beachhead; this guarantee should be extended to the Fogbow beachhead as well. Israel should also devise plans to secure aid deliveries until they reach the intended Palestinian distributor. Ideally, however, security should be provided by an [appropriate international force \(https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-794382\)](https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-794382) that has a less fraught relationship with the local population.

## Implications

Critics have used the drawbacks of airdropped aid to claim that a maritime corridor would have similar shortcomings. At the same time, the amount of food aid actually required in Gaza has not been analyzed adequately, leading some observers to assume that replicating prewar ground logistics is the only way to ensure sufficient deliveries. These arguments, coupled with fears of a possible famine, have provided ammunition for those who demand a ceasefire without preconditions (i.e., without releasing Israeli hostages).

Criticism about the cost of airdropping aid and maritime corridors is warranted, but such concerns are overblown in the case of the maritime option by itself. The argument that alternative delivery methods cannot provide meaningful quantities of aid does not apply to the maritime option either. Seaborne deliveries to northern Gaza will have the benefit of shortening ground convoys to points of greatest need, reducing opportunities for theft, and freeing up ground transport for other forms of aid (e.g., fuel delivery). They can also safely complement other modes of delivery, ultimately supplying Gaza with prewar levels of food or greater.

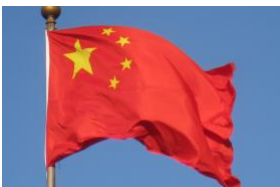
Some critics also claim that these maritime options are “too late,” but such arguments miss the point. Despite ongoing multilateral talks, no one knows whether a ceasefire is truly imminent. Even if hostilities do cease soon, the maritime corridors could serve as the cornerstone for secure and flexible stabilization operations after the war, while simultaneously empowering responsible Palestinian partners. The Cypriot corridor could have the added benefit of reordering commercial shipping for the benefit of Palestinians while accommodating Israeli security needs.

The cost-benefit ratio of the maritime aid option is even more favorable when one considers that building a permanent port for Gaza would take years to develop and may cost [billions of dollars \(https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/a-palestinian-outlet-to-the-world-a-path-toward-peace-considerations-and-options-for-a-gaza-seaport/\)](https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/a-palestinian-outlet-to-the-world-a-path-toward-peace-considerations-and-options-for-a-gaza-seaport/). For far less cost to the international community, an expedient commercial pier can be established in little more than a month. Along with the U.S. military pier, this would provide another major entry point for humanitarian aid delivered by trusted agents while avoiding the hazards of airdrops and the challenges of overland transport from the south.

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