# When Mayonnaise Becomes a Staple Food: The Dilemma of Humanitarian Response in Gaza (2024–2026)

**By Alshaikhkhalil Bahi**

In late February 2024, I was living with my family in northern Gaza, at the height of a period that food security assessments identified as dangerously close to famine. I went to the market carrying some money I had managed to save, searching for anything that could ease our hunger. After five months of supply cuts, the markets were nearly empty.

After a long walk among shops that held little more than a few leftover goods at outrageous prices, I found a seller offering large jars of mayonnaise taken from the storeroom of a closed restaurant. Its price had not yet risen much — demand for it was still low, since it was usually a complement to foods that were no longer available. So I was able to buy it. Around the same time, some carrots had appeared in the market, brought by a farmer from what remained of his farm. That day, carrots were almost the only vegetable available.

I bought the mayonnaise and the carrots and returned home with what felt like a major victory: a meal of mayonnaise mixed with carrot slices. That moment brought me back to the familiar economic concept of eroding purchasing power — but this was different. Purchasing power had collapsed not because prices alone had risen, but because the market itself had broken down.

This is not just a story about hunger. To me, it opens the door to a broader policy question that humanitarian agencies have long debated without fully resolving: when does cash assistance actually work in wartime? Cash is widely presented in the humanitarian literature as the more flexible, more efficient, and more dignified form of aid — people know their own needs better than any agency ever will. But that logic rests on one crucial assumption that tends to be treated as a given rather than a variable: the market must still be functioning.

It was not only my personal experience that illustrated this. IPC assessments in March 2024 identified famine conditions in northern Gaza, and in August 2025, famine was formally confirmed in Gaza Governorate by the Famine Review Committee — the first ever declared in the Middle East. Between 75,000 and 95,000 people had been fully cut off from any food supply for more than 40 consecutive days. WFP had suspended operations in northern Gaza; community kitchens and bakeries had closed. In that environment, sending a cash transfer to a family was almost beside the point — not because money lacked value, but because there was essentially nothing left to buy.

The reverse, however, is equally true, and just as important. When goods begin to flow again and markets regain even partial vitality, in-kind aid can become inadequate — and at times counterproductive. During the first ceasefire in January–February 2025, around 88 million pounds of food entered Gaza over 42 days. That partial market recovery changed everything almost immediately. By spring 2025, the limitations of food parcels had become impossible to ignore: they were heavy, exhausting to carry across rubble and blocked streets, and nearly impossible to store safely in damaged shelters or small tents. Meanwhile, local markets were beginning to offer the fresh and varied goods — vegetables, protein, hygiene items — that families actually needed and that no standardised parcel could anticipate.

The numbers from the second ceasefire in October 2025 make this dynamic almost impossible to argue with. According to FEWS NET's November 2025 analysis, the number of people receiving

cash assistance across the Gaza Strip had stood at just 696 in August 2025 — at the height of the famine. By October–November 2025, following the ceasefire and partial market restoration, that figure had climbed to 465,000: a jump of more than 66,700% in under two months. The infrastructure for cash delivery had existed all along. What had been absent was a functioning market to convert that cash into anything edible.

What Gaza's experience between 2024 and 2026 reveals, then, is something deceptively simple that the international humanitarian system has been slow to institutionalise: the right tool is not determined by ideological preference or administrative habit, but by the functional state of the market at a given moment, in a given place. The same household that needed emergency food rations in October 2024 needed cash transfers in February 2025. These are not contradictory conclusions — they are the same conclusion applied to two different realities. The critical distinction that assessments rarely make clearly enough is between a supply shock, where goods simply cannot reach the market and cash therefore buys nothing, and a demand shock, where goods exist but people cannot afford them and cash is precisely the right instrument. Gaza has experienced both simultaneously, in different parts of the Strip — a complexity that flat, binary aid frameworks are not built to handle.

What is needed is a humanitarian response that treats market-function monitoring not as a periodic research exercise, but as a standing operational metric — the first question asked in any field assessment, with pre-positioned cash infrastructure ready to deploy the moment conditions allow. The 42-day gap between the January 2025 ceasefire and the full deployment of cash transfer programmes was 42 days too long. Without this kind of flexibility, international assistance will keep falling into one of two failures: cash without goods, or food parcels piled on top of rubble.