



The Privatisation of Humanitarian Aid and its Implications

Junli Lim



The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

The Privatisation of Humanitarian Aid and its Implications

Junli Lim

SYNOPSIS

The emergence of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation has sparked intense debate on the privatisation of aid. Controversy surrounds the use of private military and security companies and the operation of humanitarian principles. Central to these is the question of accountability. When states engage private entities to perform and fulfil their obligations, who is accountable when things go awry?

COMMENTARY

The recent debut of the US- and Israeli-backed [Gaza Humanitarian Foundation \(GHF\)](#) has shone the spotlight on the privatisation of aid, specifically, the use and role of private military and security companies (PMSCs) and the operation of humanitarian principles. The outsourcing of war and violence by states is not new; it gained [critical traction](#) during the [Global War on Terror](#) when reliance on PMSCs in the 2001 Afghanistan and 2003 Iraq wars was revealed. The GHF case has sparked renewed discussions on the use of PMSCs for the delivery of humanitarian aid. The United Nations and other aid agencies have [strongly criticised](#) this move, citing potential violations of international law and disregard for humanitarian principles. In addition, accountability remains unclear.

The GHF Controversy

Since 2 March, Israel has [blockaded](#) humanitarian aid to Gaza in a purported attempt to prevent supplies reaching Hamas. This compounded a humanitarian catastrophe that was earlier described as a “[humanitarian hellscape](#)”, with Gaza facing a [critical risk of famine](#).



Ongoing restrictions have significantly hindered the United Nations' humanitarian efforts in Gaza, which have been sidelined by a new aid model operated by private military contractors.

Image by the author.

In May, GHF [announced](#) its plan to establish [four aid distribution sites in the south of Gaza](#), feeding [1.2 million Gazans](#) through [60 lorry loads](#) of daily aid supplies, although scant details were released. The plan includes engaging two US-based PMSCs, Safe Reach Solutions (SRS) and UG Solutions, "[to serve as on-site contractors](#)" while the Israel Defense Forces secure distribution sites from a distance of 1,000 feet. The security services of both SRS and UG Solutions were already engaged [earlier](#) this year to man a critical checkpoint between southern and northern Gaza.

GHF's plan raised grave concerns among international aid agencies that highlighted the forcible displacement of Gazans from the north, discrimination against those unable to travel to collection sites, and the use of starvation as a tool of war. Crucially, core agencies such as the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) made clear that they [would not](#) participate in a scheme that does not abide by humanitarian principles.

Not much is known about GHF and its affiliated PMSCs. [Reports](#) point to GHF and SRS being registered by the same lawyer in the United States in November 2024, with both entities sharing the same spokesperson until late May 2025. The two entities are also [closely linked](#) to the same person, Philip F. Reilly, an ex-CIA officer, who runs SRS. There is no clear information on GHF's funding source despite GHF's assurances that it is not funded by Israel. However, a [New York Times report](#) has described the GHF and its plans as "an Israeli brainchild", the result of informal discussions between former and present Israeli military officers, as well as Israeli, and at least one Israeli-American, businessmen.

The lack of transparency surrounding GHF and its affiliates, as well as its close ties to a party of the armed conflict and PMSCs, unsurprisingly places doubt on the operability of humanitarian principles.

Humanitarian Principles and the Operating Environment

Humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence form the common operating humanitarian principles of the United Nations and many other aid agencies. Although a fixed universal definition of these principles is lacking, there is consensus on their meaning – human suffering, especially that of the most vulnerable, anywhere must be addressed; distribution of aid must not favour sides and must be conducted on the basis of need, not discrimination; and aid rendered must be free of political, military or other non-humanitarian objectives.

Global developments and the increased complexities surrounding armed conflicts as well as ensuing crises, however, have led some to question whether existing principles are due for an update. Most notably, [accountability and transparency](#) are absent from the list. Although one can point to the presence of these in agency processes, their absence in key operating principles may suggest they are less important. Furthermore, downward accountability to affected populations is often sorely lacking. Accountability and transparency are crucial to the legitimacy of aid provision and have been described as an “[ethical imperative](#)”.

Militarisation of Aid

The use of PMSCs in humanitarian aid implies the use of arms in the provision of such aid. The presence of arms in itself has been shown to [heighten threat perceptions](#), intensifying barriers between affected communities and aid personnel.

Yet in Asia, militaries frequently appear as [one of the first responders](#) to disasters and are often deployed in response to both domestic and international humanitarian emergencies. Their involvement, however, rarely attracts the same kind or intensity of criticism. The deployment of militaries across the world in response to COVID-19 is an example. Although militaries operate on principles of war at a state’s direction rather than on humanitarian principles, the distinction lies heavily on context. Militaries are not profit-driven and owe allegiance to the state, to which their actions are publicly accountable. A state may direct its military to assist an affected neighbouring state during a humanitarian crisis. The objectives may include the political – to win the favour of the affected state or elevate its regional standing – but accountability is still clear.

Privatisation of Aid and International Law

Market-based solutions to humanitarian aid [may not be problematic](#) in and of themselves. However, in a complex emergency within the context of a highly politicised armed conflict involving multiple international stakeholders, the stakes become very different.

To start, international law obliges warring parties to facilitate the provision of aid; they cannot arbitrarily or unlawfully refuse such relief. The law is also clear that relief must be impartial and non-discriminatory. Furthermore, state obligations are in place to safeguard rights, particularly the right to life, which is non-derogable whether in times of war, peace or emergencies. The employment of private entities that hold no international legal status to deliver aid [transforms](#) a state’s legal obligation into a private and discretionary act and raises issues of accountability for the entities’ actions (or non-actions).

While the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has affirmed that states remain responsible for the compliance of private businesses with applicable rights and state obligations – including in extraterritorial activities – this principle has yet to be tested in a situation like the current case involving GHF. The regulation of extraterritorial activities also continues to be a subject of heated contestation. Furthermore, while one can turn to the UN International Law Commission’s [Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts](#), this instrument remains a non-binding one. In short, the law in this area is still murky.

Barely two weeks since beginning its aid mission on 27 May, GHF has already suspended operations twice because of the chaos surrounding distribution. [Reports](#) also point to at least 300 persons killed and more than 2,000 wounded while attempting to access GHF's aid. And while GHF boasts that it is distributing [19 lorry loads of food](#) a day, this pales in comparison with the United Nations' 600 lorry loads a day during the ceasefire.

The need to address accountability has never been more urgent. Outsourcing to a profit-driven, armed entity the task of delivering aid to an already deeply distressed population requires compliance with the law and the purposes for which these laws were drafted. In particular, they need to comply with key humanitarian principles, which are a reflection of relevant international human rights and humanitarian laws. Ultimately, humanitarian aid is supposed to *alleviate suffering*, not worsen it.

Junli Lim is a Research Fellow with the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) programme, Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.

