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# From conditionality to weaponisation: the transformation of aid in Palestine post-October 2023

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the shift from aid conditionality to aid weaponisation in Palestine in the aftermath of Hamas's 7 October attack. It argues that donor actions following this event represent a transformation in their approach to Palestinian aid, moving from aid conditionality to aid weaponisation, where aid is utilised not just as a securitised tool for development and governance but as a mechanism of punishment and control. The article constructs the evolution of aid conditionality, showcasing various forms encompassing both explicit and implicit conditionalities. It then explores how aid weaponisation has manifested through aid suspensions and withdrawals, donors' uncritical adoption of Israeli discourse, heightened surveillance of Palestinian organisations, and administrative measures that constrain autonomy. Thus, aid weaponisation serves as an active tool reinforcing conditions that perpetuate, rather than alleviate, settler colonial violence and, as in Gaza, ongoing genocide.

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## Introduction

In the aftermath of Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, which targeted the Gaza Envelope and resulted in the deaths of over 1200 Israeli soldiers and civilians, the Israeli government sealed off the Gaza Strip and launched a destructive military assault. This ongoing assault represents the bloodiest and most devastating episode of Israel's settler colonial campaign against the Palestinians. As of January 2025, at least 150,000 Palestinians have been killed or wounded; more than 80% of Gaza's residential and commercial buildings have been destroyed or damaged; the education sector has been crippled, with all higher education institutions destroyed and 87% of all school buildings either destroyed or damaged; and Gaza's healthcare sector has collapsed (Khatib, McKee, and Yusuf 2024; OCHA 2025a).

On 9 November 2023, three Palestinian human rights groups filed a lawsuit with the International Criminal Court, urging it to investigate Israel for genocide and to issue arrest warrants for Israeli officials (Aljazeera 2023a). This was followed by an application on 29 December 2023 by South Africa to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), instituting proceedings against Israel for violating its obligations under the Genocide Convention

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concerning Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (ICJ 2023). On 26 January 2024, the ICJ found that Israel's assault on Gaza constituted a 'plausible case of genocide' and subsequently ordered Israel to cease acts contravening the Genocide Convention and to take immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of humanitarian assistance in the Gaza Strip (ICJ 2024).

As Israel sealed off the Gaza Strip and launched its military assault in October 2023, several Western nations halted development aid to Palestinians. Austria, Denmark, Sweden, and Germany suspended funding amounting to \$139 million, affecting United Nations (UN) agencies, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and civil society organisations (CSOs) (Aljazeera 2023b). The European Union (EU), Palestine's largest donor, initiated a comprehensive review of its aid. The most impacted Palestinian recipients were Palestinian CSOs, which had their funding suspended or withdrawn with little explanation.

Coinciding with the ICJ's ruling on 26 January 2024 ordering unimpeded humanitarian access to the Gaza Strip, major humanitarian donors, including the United States (US), Germany, the EU, and 16 other donor states, suspended \$450 million of funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Palestine's largest and most established humanitarian organisation. These aid suspensions followed Israeli allegations that several of the 13,000 UNRWA employees in Gaza may have participated in the 7 October attack on Israel (UN 2024). Israel's claims, predicated on allegations within a six-page dossier sent to donors, lacked evidence to support such accusations (Charbonneau 2024). Despite UNRWA being the UN's most audited agency, with multiple neutrality frameworks, it was swiftly abandoned by donors (Lund and Browne 2024). In subsequent months, aid suspensions, withdrawals, reinstatements, or even new pledges were well publicised by donors through coordinated press statements, social media posts, and media appearances. Donors' stance on Palestinian aid amidst Israel's genocide in Gaza turned into a choreographed diplomatic performance, a public relations exercise by foreign ministers and spokespersons.

Despite extensive media coverage, scholarly analysis of donor aid suspensions and withdrawals in Palestine remains limited. The use of aid as a conditional or coercive tool has been largely under researched, particularly in relation to emerging punitive mechanisms that reinforce Israeli settler colonialism. While aid to Palestine has been widely studied, little academic attention has been given to systematically conceptualising aid conditionality and aid weaponisation in this context.

This article advances this debate, arguing that recent donor actions mark a fundamental shift in their approach to Palestinian aid, from aid conditionality to aid weaponisation. In this transformation, aid is used not just as a securitised tool for development and governance but as a mechanism of punishment and control. While aid to Palestine has long been conditional, ranging from early critiques of the Oslo aid regime to analyses framing aid as a neocolonial instrument, this article contends that donors' actions since 7 October represent a shift towards aid weaponisation (Brynen 2000; Wildeman and Tartir 2021).

The article begins by examining the literature on aid conditionality and aid weaponisation and how these relate to settler colonialism in Palestine. After establishing this framework, it presents an overview of the evolution of aid conditionality in Palestine, mapping the complex interplay of explicit and implicit conditionalities. The article identifies the emerging characteristics of aid weaponisation by examining donor behaviour before and after October 2023. It concludes by discussing the impact of aid weaponisation, linking it to conceptualisations of settler colonialism in Palestine through the lens of aid conditionality.

## Aid conditionality and aid weaponisation

Aid conditionality refers to the allocation and use of financial resources as a means to sanction or reward recipients, functioning as an instrument whereby donors manipulate recipients' cost–benefit calculations through positive and negative material incentives (Guillaumont, Boussichas, and Dsouza 2023; Koch 2015; Molenaers, Dellepiane, and Faust 2015).

Conditionality has evolved alongside shifting donor priorities, transitioning from predominantly economic imperatives to encompassing broader political and social objectives. During the 1980s and 1990s, structural adjustment programmes mandated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank imposed stringent conditions on trade liberalisation, privatisation, and regulatory reform (Kentikelenis, Stubbs, and King 2016). This policy framework, epitomised by the Washington Consensus, positioned market-oriented reforms as the sole pathway to economic growth (Williamson 2009). However, increasing criticism regarding the detrimental social impacts of these policies eventually prompted a re-evaluation of conditionality's foundational assumptions, leading to a shift towards governance conditionality in the 2000s (Kentikelenis, Stubbs, and King 2016; Stiglitz 2008).

Donors began reorienting their intervention strategies by incorporating conditions related to democratisation, human rights, and institutional transparency (Molenaers, Dellepiane, and Faust 2015). This pivot was not merely a response to ethical imperatives but also a strategic recalibration to mitigate the political fallout from earlier economic policies. Donor strategies progressively incorporated criteria designed to promote domestic institutional reforms and accountability (Carothers 2020; Kalyvitis and Vlachaki 2010; Stokke 2013). Critical assessments within this literature argue, however, that although governance conditionality ostensibly promotes institutional legitimacy, it frequently undermines recipient states' policy autonomy (Dornan 2017; Guillaumont, Boussichas, and Dsouza 2023; Mkandawire 2010). Negotiation dynamics, as explored by Dreher, Sturm, and Vreeland (2009) and Clark and Dolan (2021), highlight how governance conditions are commonly imposed within contexts of acute donor–recipient power asymmetries, leaving developing countries with limited negotiating leverage.

More recently, conditionality has expanded beyond governance frameworks into conflict and peace contexts, aiming to influence conflicting parties' behaviours and support peace processes (Herbert 2019). It has also been deployed to regulate migration flows and to incentivise or coerce aid recipients into addressing climate change (Gilley and Kinsella 2015; Restelli 2021).

Critiques of aid conditionality have raised questions about its effectiveness and appropriateness, citing frequent failures in achieving intended reforms and respecting recipient ownership (Hackenesch 2019; Svensson 2003). The 2005 Paris Declaration sought to address these issues by advocating principles of ownership and alignment, urging donors to support recipient-driven policies (Molenaers, Gagiano, et al. 2015). Despite a reduction in the number of conditions, the practice continues, and debates persist over its role in development assistance and implications for recipient sovereignty (Guillaumont, Boussichas, and Dsouza 2023). Recent scholarship has scrutinised donors' declared political and economic objectives, suggesting instead that these motivations are predominantly driven by self-interest (Fielding 2014; Sraieb 2022). Furthermore, donors' domestic political dynamics and electoral appeasement politics are increasingly influencing decisions related to aid conditionality, including aid withdrawal and suspension (Bodenstein and Faust 2017).

Building upon these critiques, a growing body of literature frames aid conditionality as a neocolonial instrument. Aid facilitates the 'liberal' West's imposition of values onto societies labelled as 'illiberal', transforming conditionality into a tool of Western politico-economic and ideological dominance (Anghie 2006; Fentahun 2023). Hewitt (2013) identifies donors' promotion of 'good governance' as reminiscent of colonial administrative principles, while Langan (2018) highlights how aid modalities effectively subsidise foreign corporate exploitation. Cain (2022) contends that donors use conditionality as a mechanism of subordination, legitimising, sustaining, and perpetuating neo-colonial relationships. Thus, aid conditionality operates as an extension of existing colonial and neo-colonial networks, exchanging recipient sovereignty for financial support (Buba 2019).

This literature resonates with interpretations of aid conditionality in Palestine under settler colonial rule. Numerous scholars have established the applicability of a settler colonial framework in Palestine (Dana and Jarbawi 2017; Khalidi 2020; Lloyd 2012; Pappé, Dana, and Naser-Najjab 2024; Salamanca et al. 2012; Veracini 2013; Wolfe 2006). Unlike the 'occupation' framework, which presumes a temporary military administration, settler colonialism captures what Wolfe (2006) terms the 'logic of elimination' or a permanent project of replacement. This framework clarifies why donors' conditionalities habitually centre on security coordination, surveillance infrastructures, and the depoliticisation of Palestinian civil society; such strictures dovetail with a political economy that seeks to neutralise rather than merely administer the colonised population (Erakat 2019; Salamanca et al. 2012; Veracini 2015). Empirically, an occupation paradigm would understate both the durability and the structural alignment of donors' conditionalities with Israel's long-term objectives (Khalidi 2020; Turner 2014; Wildeman and Tartir 2021). Therefore, this article posits that aid conditionality in Palestine can be understood through a settler colonial lens, where donors sustain Israeli colonial structures and reinforce dependency and coercive institutions. This assumption builds upon and borrows from existing scholarly analyses of neoliberal economic policies, foreign aid, development policy, and Israeli economic relations within settler colonial frameworks (Bader 2024; Bahdi and Kassis 2021; Iqtait 2021; Lund and Browne 2024; Merrino 2021; Qarmout 2023; Wildeman 2019; Wildeman and Tartir 2021).

Building on the structural logic underpinning conditionality, recent patterns reveal donor practices marked by the deliberate use of aid as a punitive instrument. Cheeseman, Swedlund, and O'Brien-Udry (2024) show that donors increasingly deploy suspensions and withdrawals as punitive measures, a pattern also noted in the Armed Conflict Survey ('Humanitarian Aid as a Weapon of War' 2019) and in Swedlund's work of aid suspensions (2017a, 2017b). In contrast to conditionality, which operates through *ex ante* incentives that seek to recalibrate a recipient's cost-benefit calculus, weaponisation involves *ex post* leverage whose primary aim is retribution rather than behavioural reform (Cheeseman, Swedlund, and O'Brien-Udry 2024; Crawford and Kacarska 2019; Portela and Mora-Sanguinetti 2023).

This focus differs from the classic sanctions literature, where economic sanctions are defined as the deliberate government-inspired withdrawal, or threat of withdrawal, of customary trade or financial relations (Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliott 1990). While the wider economic sanctions field now speaks of aid as a tool of economic sanctions, this article deliberately narrows its lens to the aid channel, drawing on scholarship of aid suspensions and withdrawals (Fabre 2018; Jeong 2019; Koch 2015; Mertens 2024; Molenaers, Gagiano, et al. 2015; Nielsen 2013; Portela and Mora-Sanguinetti 2023; Swedlund 2017a). It also draws from works analysing the weaponisation of aid to provoke, alter, or intensify conflict (Abeytia

et al. 2023; Jakupec, Kelly, and McKay 2024; Makara 2023; Martínez and Eng 2016; Narang 2014). Accordingly, the article conceptualises aid weaponisation as the deliberate suspension, withdrawal, threat, or systematic erosion of predictability of pledged assistance, undertaken with punitive intent rather than the expectation of policy compliance. This context-specific definition avoids conflating the Palestinian experience with wider sanction regimes and keeps the argument anchored in the Palestinian settler-colonial setting.

By integrating insights from these aid-specific studies, the article moves beyond the conditionality paradigm and characterises the post-October-2023 aid regime as a distinctly punitive, elimination-compatible configuration of weaponisation. The subsequent sections trace the evolution of aid conditionality in Palestine before analysing the key characteristics of the emerging patterns of aid weaponisation by donors following October 2023.

### The evolution of aid conditionality in Palestine

The decentralised and fragmented nature of aid in Palestine makes the understanding of aid conditionality inherently challenging. A multitude of actors, including aid agencies, international organisations, International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), and charities, disburse aid without central coordination, rendering precise tracking and allocation nearly impossible (Wildeman and Tartir 2023). According to World Bank data, since 1993, over \$50 billion in foreign aid has been funnelled into the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with actual figures likely higher due to underreporting and undeclared disbursements (Iqtait 2023). Despite the Palestinians witnessing one of the world's largest aid interventions regimes, there is broad scholarly consensus that aid has failed to achieve its objectives of lasting peace, effective and accountable Palestinian institutions, and sustainable socio-economic development (Iqtait 2021; Khalidi and Samour 2011; Le More 2008; Taghdisi Rad 2010; Tartir, Dana, and Seidel 2021; Turner 2015; Ibrahim and Beaudet 2012).

The scholarly evidence in support of the contention that aid has been ineffective is overwhelming and accumulates more than 20 years of academic consensus. The purpose of this section is not to revisit or reinvent this well-established body of literature, but rather to synthesise it as a necessary analytical precursor to understanding the emergent regime of aid weaponisation advanced later in the article. By foregrounding this synthesis, the discussion situates the argument within foundational scholarship while clarifying how evolving donor conditionalities have transformed aid from a developmental tool into a mechanism of colonial control and securitisation (Hamdan 2011; Turner 2012; Wildeman and Tartir 2021). This instrumentalisation is most apparent in the intricate web of explicit and implicit conditionalities imposed by donors.

Explicit conditionalities have profoundly shaped the Palestinian aid landscape by embedding formal stipulations within funding agreements, contracts, and legal frameworks that compel recipients to conform to specific political positions or actions. Generally, explicit conditionality in Palestine manifests in four ways. First, donors include clauses such as terrorism clauses, restrictive programming, and surveillance procedures in funding agreements. These agreements require recipients to renounce Palestinian resistance and to proactively screen all potential beneficiaries of aid-funded projects, including primary and secondary recipients, family members, and associates (Dana 2020; Domínguez de Olazábal 2023). Second, screenings are often conducted against donors' sanctions lists. Donors, including the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK, each enforce their own national sanctions lists, such

as the UK's Proscribed Terrorist Organisations list, the US' Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) list, and the EU's Financial Sanctions Database (Bhungalia 2023). Donors also often utilise the United Nations Security Council's global Consolidated List and lists compiled by private firms such as Thomson Reuters' World-Check (Bhungalia 2023). These lists and clauses apply to all aid recipients, including CSOs, INGOs, and the PA.

Third, donors impose political alignment conditions, mandating Palestinian recipients to commit to the peace process framework, accept the two-state solution, and refrain from actions deemed contrary to the negotiation process as understood by donors (Interview with Palestinian NGO Network member organisation 1, 2024). Donors often fixate on a post-conflict model where their priorities have included themes such as empowering democracy, building resilience, and countering extremism, all without addressing the reality of Palestinians living under occupation (Interview with PNGO Organisation 2, 2024). Such explicit conditionality undermines local voices and silences recipients' ability to critique the peace process or advocate for alternative solutions (Schulz and Suleiman 2020).

Fourth, and particularly in relation to aid directed to the PA, a significant portion of donor funding has been conditioned on the implementation of governance and security sector reforms, with a strong emphasis on cooperation with Israeli security forces. This has influenced donors, where security sector reform and coordination take precedence over social or developmental needs, with approximately 30% of international aid channelled into the Palestinian security sector (Bhungalia 2015; Keelan and Browne 2020; Murad and Tartir 2018; Tartir 2015). These explicit conditionality clauses are *ex ante* positive clauses, requiring the PA to sign contractual and legal agreements binding their implementation prior to qualifying for funding disbursements (Koch 2015).

On the other hand, implicit conditionalities, while less overt, exert substantial influence through donor practices, preferences, and funding priorities, and in Palestine manifest in four key areas. First, donors exhibit thematic and geographic funding priorities by favouring certain sectors, such as humanitarian relief or democracy, over others like advocacy or grassroots initiatives (Arda and Banerjee 2021; Challand 2008; Morrar and Sultan 2020). This preference effectively conditions funding on alignment with donor priorities, and organisations working outside these prioritised themes often face difficulties securing support (Dana 2015). Geographically, aid is directed towards projects in Area A in the West Bank, leaving Areas B and C and East Jerusalem chronically under-funded (Panepinto 2017; Risheq et al. 2023). Israeli permit denials and demolition risk are real obstacles, yet donors largely operate within, rather than contest, those constraints (OCHA 2025b; Risheq et al. 2023). This selective allocation skews development levels, exacerbates regional disparities, and empowers Israeli restrictive and segregative regimes (Ghanem 2020; Taghdisi Rad 2010).

Second, donors encourage the professionalisation and depoliticisation of Palestinian institutions by promoting organisational structures and practices aligned with Western institutional models. While framed as capacity-building, this insistence on 'professional' or technocratic criteria effectively acts as a mechanism of conditionality, shaping which organisations are deemed 'fundable' (Atia and Herrold 2018; Dana 2015). CSOs that demonstrate mastery of donor-driven reporting requirements, embrace bureaucratic norms, and centre service delivery are typically rewarded. In contrast, organisations that retain strong grassroots or political agendas, such as focusing on mobilisation, advocacy, or direct confrontation with Israeli policies, are routinely sidelined or disqualified. Through these funding practices,

donors implicitly steer Palestinian civil society towards a depoliticised, service-oriented focus, undermining its capacity for wider social and political action and distancing CSOs from their constituencies (Atia and Herrold 2018; Dana 2015). For the PA, this has meant an externally driven state-building process under conditions of active settler colonialism, which has empowered political and economic elites through funding and sustained authoritarian tendencies (El Kurd 2019).

Third, selective partnership and fragmentation have emerged as donors preferentially fund CSOs that comply with their conditions, fostering competition and fractures within civil society (Challand 2008; Dana 2015; Hanafi and Tabar 2005). In turn, organisations that resist these conditionalities or maintain a strong political stance risk exclusion or defunding. This dynamic can compel organisations to recalibrate their strategies and rhetoric simply to survive financially, diluting or discarding more transformative aims and reinforcing implicit conditionalities. Over time, it has led to heightened competition among CSOs, deepening divides and frustrating collective efforts to address broader structural challenges. Cases of outright boycotts and the formation of alternative civil society coalitions underscore the intensity of these pressures to conform (Elayah, Bashir, and Qarmout 2024).

These explicit and implicit conditionalities are accompanied by mechanisms of control involving legal instruments, administrative requirements, and financial incentives or penalties. Reliance on terrorist designation lists by the US, EU, and other countries provides a legalistic framework for restricting funding and justifies intrusive monitoring practices. Funding agreements contain detailed clauses stipulating compliance with donor policies, rigorous reporting obligations, and grant donors the unilateral right to terminate contracts, often without recourse (Interview with PNGO Organisation 1, 2024). The administrative burden associated with these requirements strains the capacities of CSOs, diverting resources away from programmatic activities and fostering a culture of self-censorship to avoid jeopardising funding (Interview with PNGO Organisation 2, 2024). Organisations are dedicating exceptional resources to communicate and engage with donors pre-funding and after funding approval. Non-compliance with donor clauses can result in severe repercussions, including defunding or legal action, creating a coercive environment that compromises organisational autonomy and integrity (Schulz and Suleiman 2020).

## From conditionality to weaponisation

The shift from aid conditionality to aid weaponisation post-October 2023 is exemplified in the systematic targeting of UNRWA and the intensified constraints on EU funding to Palestinian CSOs. These developments not only signify a reconfiguration of donor strategies but also illuminate the manipulation of aid to further entrench Israeli settler colonial objectives. UNRWA, as a principal provider of essential services to Palestinian refugees, has become a focal point for attacks that seek to delegitimise and dismantle its operations. European donors have, with increasing frequency, uncritically adopted Israeli discourse, leading to punitive funding cuts and heightened surveillance measures. By dissecting the weaponisation of aid to UNRWA and Palestinian CSOs, the following sections elucidate the mechanisms through which aid has been repurposed as an instrument punishment and control.

## *Weaponisation of UNRWA's aid*

UNRWA occupies a unique position within the international aid paradigm, functioning as a substantial public service provider to a defined group of refugees, with budgets that rival those of regional governments. In 2023, its budget amounted to \$2.4 billion, exceeding 100% of the PA's wage bill and equating to the entire Lebanese budget for that year (Iqtait 2023; UNRWA 2024). Employing at least 30,000 individuals, UNRWA is a major provider of public services across the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (UNRWA 2024). Its operations in the Gaza Strip constitute the core of public service provision, especially since the imposition of the Israeli blockade of the Strip in 2007. Berg, Jensehaugen, and Tiltnes (2022) posit that UNRWA can be conceptualised as a 'substitute for a state' or a 'quasi-state', delivering essential state-like services such as education, healthcare and social welfare to a stateless population, as well as offering emergency relief to the most impoverished refugees.

Since its inception, UNRWA has been politicised in two fundamental ways. First, the agency has assisted Palestinian refugees in enduring their statelessness, navigating regional labour markets, and, as some argue, sustaining themselves as a political force (Albanese and Takkenberg 2020). For decades, UNRWA has been perceived as a representative agency for Palestinian refugees; its very presence on the international stage signifies the persistent continuity of the Palestinian refugees and their rights (Irfan 2023). Undermining UNRWA as a political force would invariably contribute to the erasure of Palestinian refugees from recurring international political discourse (Al-Husseini 2010; Berg, Jensehaugen, and Tiltnes 2022).

Second, UNRWA's provision of quasi-state services and its comparatively large operational budget have made it a target for leverage and politicisation. The agency has been compelled to operate under conditional funding, a unique situation for a UN agency, where funding is tied to specific conditions rather than being channelled through existing UN mechanisms. UN neutrality rules, typically applied uniformly across UN agencies, have been excessively enforced upon UNRWA, with its own Advisory Commission often sidelined by major donors (Berg, Jensehaugen, and Tiltnes 2022). To secure funding, UNRWA has frequently signed memoranda of understandings accepting conditional clauses as prerequisites for disbursement. The signings of funding frameworks with the US and EU in 2021 exemplify this conditionality; these agreements redefined UNRWA's operational scope by categorising a wide range of Palestinian political actions as terrorism and mandating alterations to educational curricula to qualify for funding (Rabee et al. 2022). Donor and Israeli pressure have resulted in UNRWA working with Israel and other host countries in ways that undermine the human rights of Palestinian refugees, such as providing comprehensive employee reports to Israel and other host governments and holding high-level meetings with Israeli officials, including military personnel (Hamdan 2024).

Against this backdrop, UNRWA's funding has increasingly become a theatrical arena for donors' conditionality and, ultimately, a tool of aid weaponisation. Since the 1990s, the agency has faced obstacles in meeting its funding requirements, with austerity measures becoming a recurrent feature (Al-Husseini 2010). The US has historically been UNRWA's largest donor, but in recent years delays, reductions, and frequent suspensions have come to define US–UNRWA relations (Zanotti 2024). Furthermore, the EU conditioned aid disbursements to UNRWA in 2021 for the first time in its history (Rabee et al. 2022).

Since October 2023, UNRWA has been weaponised on multiple levels. Israel has intensified its actions against UNRWA by physically destroying the agency's facilities, obstructing the entry of humanitarian assistance, and killing at least 310 UNRWA employees, as well as numerous displaced persons seeking refuge in its shelters (OCHA 2025a; UNRWA 2025). Simultaneously, Israel has securitised UNRWA by accusing it of mass involvement in military activities and associating it and its staff with Palestinian political factions and their military wings, thereby voiding the agency's UN mandate and justifying attacks on its schools and facilities (Hamdan 2024). These actions were subsequently followed by the Israeli Knesset's enactment of a complete ban on the organisation in October 2024 (Amnesty International 2024).

In January 2024, following Israeli allegations that some of the more than 13,000 UNRWA staff members may have been involved in the 7 October attack, donors swiftly weaponised aid by suspending funding, disregarding the agency's established adherence to UN regulations and additional conditionalities. In April 2024, an independently commissioned UN report affirmed that UNRWA had instituted and updated a significant array of policies, mechanisms and procedures that uphold neutrality in accordance with UN standards (UN 2024). Nonetheless, the report listed 50 recommendations for UNRWA, including more stringent screening and vetting of staff (UN 2024). Most major donors, including several EU member states, such as Germany and other principal contributors to UNRWA, as well as Japan and Australia, reinstated their funding while appending policy changes at UNRWA, mainly pertaining to staff vetting and educational curricula. Notably, conditions on changes in UNRWA's educational curricula were imposed at a time when the UN had confirmed Israel's destruction and damage of nearly all schools in the Gaza Strip (OCHA 2025a). The US has not reinstated funding following its suspension in January 2024, and the US Congress has passed legislation disallowing further funding (Zanotti 2024).

### ***European donors and Palestinian civil society organisations***

European donors have long engaged with Palestinian CSOs, a relationship predating the Madrid Peace Process and the Oslo Accords (Hanafi and Tabar 2005). While all donors have imposed varying degrees of explicit and implicit conditionalities, EU donors showcased flexibility and openness to discuss certain conditionalities, especially with prominent Palestinian CSOs such as Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, Al-Haq, and the Bisan Center for Research and Development (Anonymous Interview 2024). However, in recent years, there has been a marked shift towards aid weaponisation and a narrowing space for Palestinian CSOs.

In 2017, the EU Parliament passed a new counter-terrorism framework. That same year, EU financing programmes added a clause indicating new measures to prevent EU funds from reaching Palestinian CSOs involved in what the EU described as inciting hatred and violence (EU 2017). In 2019, the EU introduced new clauses in its contracts with Palestinian CSOs, specifically Annex II, Article 1.5bis, requiring grant beneficiaries to ensure that none of their subcontractors, partners, or participants were listed under EU restrictive measures. This clause expanded the scope of vetting required by CSOs, as several Palestinian political parties were included in these restrictive measures (European External Action Service 2019). Although introduced in 2019, the effects of these measures became more pronounced in 2020 and 2021, placing additional administrative burdens on organisations and raising concerns about privacy and the criminalisation of Palestinian advocacy (Shoaibi 2024).

In 2021, Israel designated six prominent Palestinian CSOs as terrorist organisations (Aljazeera 2021). Donors faced political pressure to align with Israeli policies, leading to heightened scrutiny and, in some cases, withdrawal of funds. For example, Israel's proscription of Addameer may have influenced the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)'s termination of a negotiated funding partnership in late 2021 (Interview with PNGO Organisation 2, 2024). However, many donors expressed support for Palestinian CSOs, choosing to trust existing mechanisms of conditionality and long-standing partnerships with these influential organisations. Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden issued a joint statement declaring that Israel had not substantiated its claims to designate these CSOs as 'terrorist organisations', and therefore they would continue cooperating with and funding civil society in Palestine (Government of the Netherlands 2022).

Opposing Israel's proscription did not equate to unconditional funding. The designation occurred amid a long-standing escalation of conditionalities that extended beyond standard accountability measures, increasingly encroaching upon the autonomy and operational capacities of CSOs (Anonymous Interview 2024). This context sets the stage for the weaponisation of aid in the immediate aftermath of the 7 October attack, characterised by four major developments.

### *Funding suspensions and withdrawals*

Donors used funding to punish Palestinian CSOs for their political positions and to penalise Palestinians following the 7 October attack. On 8 October, Germany's Minister for Development, Svenja Schulze, announced the suspension of Palestinian developmental aid (BMZ 2023). Shortly after, on 11 and 25 October, Sweden and Switzerland respectively announced their aid suspensions and ordered their development agencies to review aid to Palestine (FDFA 2023; Government of Sweden 2023). On 8 November 2023, EU-funded CSOs were notified of a review of funded projects and organisations, although the EU did not suspend or terminate aid (European Commission 2023). Funding suspensions were sometimes publicly announced before organisations were officially informed; for instance, Switzerland shared its decision to suspend aid on the social media platform X before directly notifying CSOs (Interview with PNGO Organisation 2, 2024). All of these donors concluded their reviews by stating there were no instances of fund misuse and that existing procedures were sufficient to prevent such misuse (House of Commons Library 2024). Despite reports clearing Palestinian CSOs of financial misconduct, many organisations reported that funds were not fully restored and that some contracts were either terminated or left unrenewed (Interview with PNGO Organisation 1, 2024).

### *Adoption of Israeli discourse*

Unlike donors' approach to Israel's unsubstantiated proscription of Palestinian CSOs in 2021, donors immediately internalised Israeli discourse following 7 October. This included framing both violent and non-violent forms of Palestinian resistance as terrorism, effectively scrutinising and delegitimising Palestinian political expression and advocacy (Interview with PNGO Organisation 1, 2024). Germany had been in discussions with the Palestinian CSOs proscribed by Israel in 2021, for strategic partnerships and funding immediately prior to 7 October 2023. However, after 7 October, Germany decided that no funding would be allowed to Palestinian

organisations classified as terrorist or proscribed by Israel (Meier 2024). One such organisation, Al-Haq, which had a contractual agreement with Germany, was informed that this relationship would end, and renewals would not be possible in future years (Anonymous Interview 2024). Notably, Germany's aid review after 7 October 2023 was never published, leaving Palestinian CSOs unable to review what was written about them.

Following Sweden's two-round review of aid in Palestine, a new aid strategy for the Middle East and North Africa was announced in March 2024. As a result, all existing contracts between the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) or other Swedish INGOs and Palestinian CSOs were terminated. The new aid strategy declared that funded developmental activities in Palestine 'must counter extremism, Islamism, and antisemitism' (SIDA 2024b). SIDA permanently suspended funding to several Palestinian organisations, including al-Shabaka, the Palestinian NGO Network, and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights. SIDA cited non-compliance with contractual clauses related to anti-discrimination, based on these organisations' public statements condemning acts of genocide in Gaza and accusing some European states of complicity (Interview with PNGO Organisation 2, 2024). Moreover, some organisations received requests from European donors for written responses to accusations published by NGO Monitor, a radical Israeli organisation associated with the right wing (Anonymous Interview 2024). In meetings with donors after October 2023, many Palestinian CSOs have reported donors' fixation on supposed radicalisation and extremism in Palestinian society, or what a director of a Palestinian CSOs in Ramallah described as the rise of 'the political Israeli and the apolitical Palestinian' discourse among donors (Anonymous Interview, 2024).

### *Criminalisation and surveillance of Palestinian civil society organisations*

Donors are classifying Palestinian CSOs as potential security threats, subjecting them to rigorous vetting and surveillance. Since October 2023, cooperation and dialogue have been replaced by securitisation and surveillance. Monitoring of communication and social media activities of Palestinian CSOs has become normalised. For instance, in SIDA's second review of developmental funding to Palestine, submitted in December 2023, more than 200 Palestinian organisations were vetted, examining over 100,000 social media posts of CSOs, their employees, and employees' social circles (SIDA 2024b). Vetting for all future SIDA-funded projects in Palestine will involve screening CSOs receiving funds, implementing partners, and even suppliers financed by grant funds against EU-sanctioned vetting lists. SIDA stipulates that this may be done centrally by Swedish authorities or by contracted third parties (SIDA 2024a). Similarly, the EU Commission's report on EU developmental funding identified additional measures to qualify for and maintain funding, introducing a new 'anti-incitement clause' that may be monitored by third-party oversight of all funded organisations' communications and activities and expansive vetting procedures (European Commission 2023).

### *Administrative weaponisation and bureaucratic control*

Donors have weaponised administrative measures to exert further control over Palestinian CSOs, imposing complex bureaucratic requirements that hinder their operations. A salient example is the demand for extensive documentation to distribute aid in Gaza. Amidst the ongoing genocide in Gaza, where documentation is often destroyed or impossible to obtain, organisations are required to provide detailed records of tax receipts and purchase sources.

Without these documents, aid cannot be distributed, even when Israel permits humanitarian access. This results in withheld aid and forces organisations that deliver aid without such documentation to absorb costs through their core budgets (Anonymous Interview 2024).

Moreover, new ad hoc eligibility requirements introduced by donors like the EU, in addition to vetting and anti-incitement clauses, are creating added layers of documentation to confirm adherence to these requirements (European Commission 2023). As such, funding contracts have become increasingly lengthy and complex, sometimes up to 200 pages, with clauses so extensive that Palestinian CSOs are overwhelmed by legal obligations requiring significant time and expertise to navigate. One organisation reported dedicating more resources to legal inquiries, revisions, and communications with donors than to actual project implementation (Interview with PNGO Organisation 2, 2024).

Finally, Israel's routine denial of visas to humanitarian workers represents another layer of administrative weaponisation. Donors often refrain from publicly condemning or challenging this practice, instead adjusting operations to fit within Israeli regulatory frameworks (Anonymous Interview 2024). This acquiescence illustrates tacit complicity in these restrictive measures.

## Discussion

In the previous sections, two arguments were advanced. First, aid conditionality in Palestine has historically functioned within explicit and implicit frameworks. Second, through a detailed examination of donor behaviour post-October 2023, this article argues that the discourse and practice surrounding Palestinian aid have shifted significantly towards weaponisation. This shift is performative and actively punitive, affecting Palestinian civil society, humanitarian organisations such as UNRWA, and the broader Palestinian political landscape. These combined elements, conditionality frameworks and aid weaponisation, serve as instruments to entrench colonial power dynamics and have become central to donors' strategies, reflecting and reinforcing Israeli settler colonial agendas.

Aid in Palestine has always been conditional, governed primarily by the foreign policy and security regimes of donor states, closely aligned with Israel's settler colonial objectives. As long as aid projects and recipients did not threaten these securitised boundaries, aid had room to form a base for much needed humanitarian and developmental work (Tabar 2016). This is evident in the long-standing relationships between Palestine's CSOs and many European donors, which once facilitated strategic collaborations and, although less common recently, core funding and access to negotiated project funds. This underscores the significant shift that has occurred in recent years, whereby donors who had maintained relationships with Palestinian CSOs for over 30 years have uncritically adopted the Israeli settler colonial discourse and claims about Palestinian CSOs.

Donors have moved decisively from passive complicity to active agency in policing, coercing, and punishing Palestinian recipients. The assumption that donors historically viewed aid as a form of political guilt, an attempt to compensate for the international community's failure to curb Israel's settler colonial expansion, no longer holds weight (Le More 2008). And while the immediate catalyst for weaponising aid was Hamas's attack on 7 October, the foundations had long since been established through myriad explicit and implicit conditionalities. They were also established through previous, although less uniform, funding suspensions and withdrawals. These included the aid suspensions imposed on the PA after

Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian elections, as well as the US and Australian aid withdrawals during the Trump presidency in 2018 (ABC 2018; Amr 2018). Such gradual moves have shaped donors' default positions regarding Palestinian funding, with aid suspensions and withdrawals becoming more common and uniform.

Aid weaponisation has indeed become more frequent and normalised on the global stage, yet donors' actions in Palestine depart significantly from these broader trends. As Cheeseman, Swedlund, and O'Brien-Udry (2024) recently demonstrated, aid suspensions and withdrawals are generally influenced by geopolitical and economic factors, perceived human rights violations, or military coups. Yet none of these conditions align with the discussed weaponisation of aid in Palestine, where there has been no breach of conditionality, no military coup altering governance structures or CSOs, and no substantive changes in how humanitarian agencies operate. Furthermore, if the sweeping suspensions and withdrawals were truly triggered by the events of 7 October, donors' long-standing recognition of the West Bank and Gaza as administratively distinct areas, in both donor operations and conditionality frameworks, does not reconcile with the unprecedented scope of aid weaponisation targeting Palestinians overall.

Instead, donors' weaponisation of aid has become an arena for political contestation where donors' constructed realities of Palestine abstract the political realities of Israeli settler colonialism (Hanafi and Tabar 2005). SIDA's new funding vision exemplifies this position, with its new strategy listing supposed rife Palestinian 'Islamism, antisemitism, and extremism' as obstacles to development (SIDA 2024a). By assimilating Israel's exclusionary colonial discourse, donors effectively depoliticise inherently political issues, reducing Palestinian recipients to apolitical objects who must prove their neutrality to access assistance. This approach not only reinforces Israeli settler colonialism but also marginalises the broader humanitarian and developmental imperatives vital to Palestinian society.

Thus, aid weaponisation manifests as an active tool reinforcing conditions that perpetuate, rather than alleviate, settler colonial violence, and, as in Gaza, ongoing genocide. UNRWA epitomises this trend. Despite operating under a stringent neutrality framework and satisfying donor requirements, even to the objection and protest of the primary population it is mandated to serve, the organisation has faced coordinated aid suspension and withdrawal campaigns (Hamdan 2024). Allegations brought forward by Israel were sufficient for donors to suspend aid without reviewing evidence. While peer pressure may partly influence some donors' actions against UNRWA, this behaviour more accurately reflects their adoption of Israel's discourse and an alignment with neocolonial and settler colonial processes that oppress Palestinians. Furthermore, it underscores wilful enabling of Israel to exploit donors' tendencies to suspend or withdraw funds without substantial reason.

It is important to note, however, that Palestinian aid recipients are not without agency; historically and presently, some have refused to engage with aid or partner with donors under punitive contractual agreements or adjustments. Palestinian CSOs have a precedent of rejecting donor conditionality. For instance, they resisted the US counter-terrorism clauses introduced in 2002 and the EU's Annex II, Article 1.5bis, both of which incorporated vetting and surveillance against donors' restrictive and sanctioned lists (Cochrane and Wilson 2025). It is safe to assume that some Palestinian CSOs are likely to decline new donor funding participation on political and practical grounds (Badil 2019). Accepting such punitive and controlling conditions would impede their ability to provide impartial humanitarian assistance and would effectively position them as security agents, aligning with language and

classifications that reflect Israeli policies and donors' compliance with those standards (Anonymous Interview 2024).

Since October 2023, the weaponisation of aid has expanded beyond UNRWA and Palestinian CSOs to include aid directed towards the PA and regional Arab CSOs. The PA's fiscal stability has significantly deteriorated, evidenced by escalating debt and accumulating arrears owed to Palestinian banks, private suppliers, and government employees (Iqtait 2024). Amidst aid levels declining to historic lows since the PA's establishment, the EU agreed to provide conditional funding, formalised in a letter of intent that stipulates explicit key performance indicators (KPI) as prerequisites for disbursement to the PA (European Commission 2024). The letter makes no mention of Israel's policies of appropriating Palestinian tax funds, the occupation, settlement expansion, or the ongoing genocide. Regionally, donors have threatened suspensions and withdrawals of funding to Arab CSOs that have publicly expressed solidarity with Palestinians and condemned Israel's genocide in Gaza. Germany, notably, has spearheaded efforts to reduce or delay funding to regional CSOs based in Egypt. In one instance, funding was withdrawn from a human trafficking prevention project undertaken by the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance after the organisation endorsed a statement condemning Israel's genocide in Gaza and expressing solidarity with Palestinians (ANND 2024).

## Conclusion

The weaponisation of aid in Palestine extends beyond instances of suspensions and withdrawals, embedding itself through mechanisms designed to amplify punitive and controlling measures. The deliberate strategies employed by international donors, including the suspension of support to UNRWA, termination of funding to Palestinian CSOs, and refusal to renew funding agreements, are emblematic of this systemic approach. Additionally, the PA faces expansive conditionalities imposed through KPI-style requirements, further entrenching external control over its operations.

Central to the aid weaponisation are interconnected mechanisms such as the politicisation of aid, the imposition of onerous administrative burdens on recipients, donors' adoption of Israeli discourse, and the securitisation of Palestinian recipients. Donors have intensified surveillance measures, including far-reaching monitoring and vetting even for Gaza's recipients amid ongoing genocide, thereby leveraging aid as a tool to punish and exert maximum control over Palestinian society.

The examination of the evolution of aid conditionalities reveals an intensification in explicit and implicit conditionalities placed on Palestinian organisations well before October 2023. Such conditions unequivocally reflect donor priorities that are fundamentally aligned with perpetuating Israeli settler colonial agendas. Through these carefully orchestrated measures, aid is deliberately transformed into a punitive instrument that systematically erodes Palestinian autonomy, suppress local, and entrenches oppressive power structures.

This recalibration of aid dynamics transforms Palestinian recipients from rights-bearing individuals into passive beneficiaries who must navigate an increasingly oppressive landscape to access essential resources. The instrumentalisation of aid in this manner undermines human dignity and agency, reducing Palestinians to objects of conditional intervention rather than partners in development. It signifies a deliberate alignment of donor policies with oppressive measures that erode resilience and autonomy.

In the context of Gaza, the ramifications are particularly severe. The convergence of aid weaponisation with conditions of extreme violence and genocide exacerbates the humanitarian crisis, subjecting Palestinians to a paradigm of assistance that demands apolitical acquiescence in the face of existential threats.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the findings presented here are limited by the scope of available evidence and the context of the analysis conducted after October 2023. This article does not claim to comprehensively capture all dimensions of aid conditionality and aid weaponisation practices in Palestine. Nevertheless, the analysis clearly suggests that understanding aid as an instrument of international assistance is fundamentally incomplete without acknowledging how its conditional and weaponised forms systematically perpetuate Israeli settler colonialism.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Ethics

Interviews were conducted by the author with ethical approval from The Australian National University (project H/2024/1070). Interviewees gave oral informed consent. All requested anonymity. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's aims, the voluntary nature of their involvement, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time. They also consented to the inclusion of anonymised quotations in the manuscript.

## Data availability statement

No data are available due to confidentiality agreements with interviewees.

## Notes on contributor

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