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International Criminal Responsibility for Violations Against Civilians in the Gaza Strip

المسؤولية الجنائية الدولية عن الانتهاكات المرتكبة ضد المدنيين في قطاع غزة

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Abstract:

This study investigates the legal dimensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Gaza Strip, with particular emphasis on the international criminal responsibility arising from violations committed against civilians. It seeks to identify the legal grounds upon which accountability may be established and to evaluate the effectiveness of international mechanisms designed to prosecute those responsible for serious breaches of international law. The study concludes that certain acts directed against civilians may qualify as crimes against humanity when the constituent elements required under international law are fulfilled. Despite the existence of legal frameworks intended to ensure accountability, their implementation continues to face substantial legal and political constraints that undermine the delivery of justice and effective remedies for victims.

Keywords: International Criminal; Responsibility; Gaza Strip; International Humanitarian Law; War Crimes.

المخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة بيان الطبيعة القانونية للنزاع الإسرائيلي الفلسطيني في قطاع غزة، من خلال تحديد الأساس القانوني للمساءلة عن الجرائم المرتكبة بحق السكان المدنيين. وتهدف إلى إبراز مدى إمكانية ترتيب المسؤولية الجنائية الدولية عن هذه الانتهاكات وتقييم فعالية الآليات الدولية في ملاحقة مرتكبيها. ومن بين النتائج التي خلصت إليها الدراسة إلى أن العديد من الأفعال المرتكبة ضد المدنيين قد ترقى إلى جرائم ضد الإنسانية متى توافرت أركانها القانونية. وأن المنظومة القانونية الدولية توفر إطاراً للمساءلة، إلا أن تطبيقها العملي يواجه تحديات قانونية وسياسية تحد من فعالية تحقيق العدالة وإنصاف الضحايا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المسؤولية الجنائية الدولية، قطاع غزة، القانون الدولي الإنساني، جرائم الحرب.

1. INTRODUCTION

The protection of civilians during armed conflicts constitutes one of the fundamental objectives of international humanitarian law and international criminal law. These branches of international law are designed to alleviate the humanitarian consequences of armed hostilities by establishing legal standards that prohibit attacks against civilians and criminalize serious violations affecting protected persons. In this regard, international criminal responsibility has become an essential instrument for prosecuting individuals responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide, thereby reinforcing the principle that grave international crimes must not go unpunished.

The events in the Gaza Strip have drawn significant international legal and humanitarian attention due to the extensive impact of the hostilities on civilian populations. Following the escalation of violence that began on 7 October 2023, the

region witnessed a marked deterioration in the humanitarian situation, accompanied by large-scale destruction and a considerable number of civilian casualties. The ensuing military operations and counter-operations intensified concerns regarding compliance with the rules of international humanitarian law, particularly those relating to the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution in attack.

Against this background, this study aims to examine the legal basis for attributing international criminal responsibility for violations committed against civilians in the Gaza Strip.

It further seeks to assess the adequacy of existing international accountability mechanisms and to identify the principal challenges that hinder their effective implementation.

The study addresses the following research question:

To what extent can international criminal responsibility be established for violations

committed against civilians in the Gaza Strip, and how effective are international mechanisms in ensuring accountability for such violations?

The objectives of this study are to:

- Analyze the legal nature of the conflict in the Gaza Strip and identify the main violations affecting civilians, together with their legal characterization under international law;
- Examine the legal foundations of international criminal responsibility and explore the mechanisms available for its enforcement.

The study proceeds from the assumption that serious violations committed against civilians in the Gaza Strip may constitute international crimes capable of engaging international criminal responsibility. However, the practical enforcement of such responsibility remains subject to legal complexities and political considerations that may hinder the effective administration of international justice.

To address these issues, the study employs a descriptive-analytical approach based on the examination of international legal instruments, relevant treaty provisions, and legal scholarship relating to the subject matter.

For the purpose of analysis, the study is divided into two main sections. The first section focuses on the legal framework governing violations committed against civilians in the Gaza Strip and their legal characterization under international law. The second section examines the legal basis of international criminal responsibility and discusses the principal obstacles affecting the effectiveness of international accountability mechanisms.

2. First Subtitle :Legal Framework Governing Violations Against Civilians in the Gaza Strip

The legal status of practices undertaken within the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including settlement activities, has been the subject of extensive debate within international legal scholarship. Several commentators and legal experts maintain that certain practices may constitute violations of international humanitarian law and, under specific

circumstances, amount to war crimes. This position is supported by Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, which prohibits the transfer of the occupying power's civilian population into occupied territory¹. Comparable provisions are also reflected in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Accordingly, this section examines the legal characterization of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its implications for the protection of civilians. It further analyzes the principal violations allegedly committed against civilian populations and assesses their classification within the framework of international humanitarian law and international criminal law.

2.1: First: The Legal Characterization of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Its Impact on Civilians

Following the 1967 war, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and established military control over these territories², leading to ongoing legal debate regarding the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention and the obligations arising under international humanitarian law. Since then, recurrent hostilities in Gaza have resulted in significant civilian casualties and widespread damage to civilian infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, shelters, and United Nations facilities. These incidents have raised serious concerns regarding compliance with the principles of distinction and civilian protection, which constitute fundamental rules of international humanitarian law.

2.1.1 Legal Characterization of the Conflict under International Law

The legal classification of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a highly debated issue in international legal scholarship due to its significant implications for determining the applicable rules of international law. Such characterization influences the scope of protection afforded to civilians and civilian objects, as well as the attribution of international and criminal responsibility for violations committed during the conflict³.

In international law, legal characterization involves identifying the nature of an armed

conflict according to established legal criteria. The 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I of 1977⁴ provide the principal framework for this assessment by distinguishing between international and non-international armed conflicts and determining the legal provisions governing each type of conflict.

A considerable part of international legal doctrine links the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the situation of military occupation in the Palestinian territories, which leads to its classification, for the purposes of international humanitarian law, as an international armed conflict. This view is supported by the continued occupation and the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention on the protection of civilians in time of war. It is further reinforced by United Nations resolutions and the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the construction of the separation wall, both of which confirm that international humanitarian law applies to the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Despite the clarity of these established legal norms, the occupying power has, in practice, pursued a scorched-earth approach in Gaza, involving strikes on residential buildings, schools, and hospitals. Such conduct amounts to a serious violation of obligations under international humanitarian law, particularly those concerning the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure⁵.

The Hague Regulations of 1907 further strengthen these protections. Article 23(g) establishes that the destruction or seizure of enemy property is prohibited unless it is strictly justified by an imperative military necessity, meaning it cannot be carried out for arbitrary or punitive purposes. Article 46⁶, in turn, requires occupying forces to respect private property and prohibits its confiscation, underscoring the obligation to protect civilian possessions during armed conflict. These core principles have, in practice, been widely disregarded during the repeated military operations in Gaza⁷.

2.1.2 Grave Violations Committed Against Civilians in Gaza

The Gaza Strip, with a population exceeding 2.3 million people living within a very limited area of about 365 km², is among the most densely populated regions globally⁸. This demographic pressure has significantly increased the vulnerability of civilians, particularly in the context of large-scale military operations that have included attacks affecting schools, hospitals, shelters, and United Nations facilities. Such incidents raise serious concerns regarding compliance with the core principle of distinction, which requires parties to a conflict to differentiate at all times between civilian objects and military objectives.

Since the escalation of hostilities on 7 October 2023, Gaza has experienced a severe humanitarian crisis. By April 2025, the reported toll included more than 35,000 deaths, among them a substantial number of children and women, in addition to tens of thousands of injuries and mass forced displacement affecting over 1.7 million people. This situation has been described by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as a large-scale human rights and humanitarian catastrophe, particularly in light of the collapse of essential public services, including healthcare⁹, and the severe shortage of basic necessities such as food, water, and electricity¹⁰.

Various international and human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and UNICEF, have reported patterns of conduct that may amount to serious violations of international law, including potential war crimes and crimes against humanity. These include the use of disproportionate force, attacks on civilians, and restrictions on humanitarian aid¹¹.

From a legal perspective, these actions contravene key provisions of international humanitarian law. Article 51 of Additional Protocol I (1977)¹² protects civilians by prohibiting indiscriminate attacks and requiring parties to ensure that military operations are directed only at legitimate military objectives. Article 57 reinforces the

principle of proportionality and obliges parties to avoid excessive civilian harm in relation to anticipated military advantage. Article 147 of the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) defines grave breaches, including willful killing, inhuman treatment, and extensive destruction of property not justified by military necessity. Together, these rules establish a legal framework intended to limit the effects of armed conflict and protect civilian life and infrastructure, a framework that has been seriously called into question in the context described above¹³.

3. Second Subtitle: Legal Basis of International Criminal Responsibility and Obstacles to International Justice

International humanitarian law establishes a binding legal framework aimed at protecting civilians during armed conflicts, requiring compliance from all parties without exception. Nevertheless, the situation in Gaza has been described in legal scholarship as involving serious and systematic violations that undermine civilian protection and run contrary to the core principles of this legal regime.

3.1. Legal Basis of International Criminal Responsibility in Gaza

The Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 sets out clear obligations for the protection of civilians under occupation. Article (27) requires that protected persons be treated humanely and protected from all forms of violence and degrading treatment. Article (33) explicitly prohibits collective punishment. Article (18) guarantees the protection of hospitals and medical establishments. Article (24) provides special protection for children due to their vulnerability in armed conflict. Article (55) obliges the occupying power to ensure the provision of food and medical supplies necessary for the survival of the civilian population¹⁴.

Taken together, these provisions constitute an important legal foundation for establishing international criminal responsibility in cases of serious violations of civilian protection norms during armed conflict.

The Additional Protocol I of 1977 strengthens the protection of civilians through several key rules: Article (48) requires parties to

distinguish between civilians and combatants, Article (51/4) prohibits indiscriminate attacks, Article (54/1) forbids the use of starvation as a method of warfare, and Article (57) obliges all parties to take constant care and feasible precautions to reduce civilian harm during military operations.

These obligations are reinforced by customary international humanitarian law, which similarly emphasizes proportionality and the duty to take all practicable measures to avoid or limit harm to civilians¹⁵.

In this regard, the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on the 2014 Gaza conflict concluded that there were reasonable grounds to believe that serious violations of international law occurred, including acts potentially amounting to war crimes due to the extensive and disproportionate impact on civilians and civilian infrastructure¹⁶.

Overall, the conduct described cannot be viewed as isolated violations of international humanitarian law, but rather as part of a consistent and systematic pattern that conflicts with its fundamental principles. These practices have been particularly evident since the escalation of hostilities in Gaza on 7 October 2023 and have continued through May 2025, with persistent disregard for established rules of civilian protection. This situation underscores the pressing need for effective international accountability mechanisms to ensure justice for victims.

In this regard, the 1949 Geneva Conventions, and in particular the Fourth Geneva Convention on the protection of civilians in time of war, enshrine the principle of individual criminal responsibility for grave breaches. Article (146) obliges States Parties to actively search for individuals suspected of committing or ordering such violations and to prosecute them before their domestic courts, irrespective of their nationality.¹⁷

Article (147) of the Fourth Geneva Convention defines grave breaches as serious violations such as wilful killing, torture, inhuman treatment, and large-scale destruction of property not justified by military necessity, all of which entail international criminal responsibility¹⁸.

The principle of command responsibility, as set out in the Additional Protocol I of 1977 (Articles 86 and 87), provides that military commanders and civilian superiors may incur criminal liability if they knew or should have known about serious violations committed by their subordinates and failed to take necessary measures to prevent or punish them¹⁹. This doctrine, affirmed in international jurisprudence such as the Nuremberg Tribunal, also extends to cases of direct and public incitement to genocide²⁰.

Article (27) of the Rome Statute establishes the principle of irrelevance of official capacity²¹, meaning that all individuals are subject to criminal prosecution regardless of their official position or rank. It further clarifies that immunities or special procedural rules do not bar the Court from exercising jurisdiction over any person²².

Article (28) sets out the doctrine of command responsibility, holding military commanders and other superiors criminally liable for crimes committed by subordinates if they knew, or should have known, about the crimes and failed to take necessary measures to prevent, suppress, or report them to the competent authorities²³.

3.2 The Role of the International Criminal Court in Holding Israel Accountable

The International Criminal Court plays an important role in addressing alleged violations committed against Palestinian civilians. After Palestine acceded to the Rome Statute, it enabled the activation of ICC jurisdiction over crimes committed in its territory. Following this step, the ICC opened a preliminary examination into alleged crimes linked to military operations in Gaza to determine whether a formal investigation is warranted²⁴.

3.3. Legal Obstacles to International Criminal Justice

The pursuit of international criminal justice is subject to several legal constraints, particularly certain structural tensions and gaps within the Rome Statute that may limit the effectiveness of the International Criminal Court.

3.3.1. Powers of the Security Council

A major legal obstacle lies in the broad authority of the United Nations Security

Council, which can significantly influence the Court's work. Under the Rome Statute, the Security Council may refer situations involving alleged international crimes to the ICC Prosecutor. It may also defer investigations or prosecutions for a period of 12 months, subject to renewal, when such a measure is considered necessary to maintain international peace and security.

These powers may affect the independence and pace of international criminal proceedings²⁵. These powers have been criticized because they may weaken the independence of the International Criminal Court by allowing influential states to indirectly affect its decisions through the UN Security Council. In addition²⁶, the use of the veto by permanent members can obstruct judicial processes, creating a legal and political challenge to the effectiveness of international criminal justice²⁷.

3.3.2 Challenges in Enforcing ICC Decisions and Judgments

The Rome Statute does not contain an explicit obligation requiring states to execute International Criminal Court decisions. As a result, enforcement depends primarily on state cooperation, which can affect the consistency and effectiveness of implementing judicial rulings.²⁸.

3.3.3 Political Obstacles to International Criminal Justice

International criminal justice is also shaped by political considerations, including state alliances and competing interests that may hinder accountability for international crimes.

Furthermore, the failure of some major powers to ratify the Rome Statute limits the Court's jurisdiction over their nationals, thereby weakening the principle of equal application of international criminal law²⁹.

After Palestine joined the International Criminal Court, the Court acquired jurisdiction over alleged crimes committed within its territory from 13 June 2014, including those related to the 2014 Gaza conflict ("Operation Protective Edge"), which occurred between 7 July 2014 and 26 August 2014³⁰.

It is also important to note that after Operation "Protective Edge," further escalations

followed, including Operation “Guardian of the Walls” in May 2021 and Operation “Al-Aqsa Flood” in October 2023, launched by the Al-Qassam Brigades and other Palestinian resistance groups in response to continued violations against Al-Aqsa Mosque and recurring actions against the Palestinian population. These developments illustrate the continuity of armed confrontations between Palestinian resistance factions and Israeli occupying forces.

3.3.4 Israel’s Objection to Admissibility Based on the Principle of Complementarity

Israel invokes its domestic judicial system to argue that national proceedings take precedence over the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, in line with the principle of complementarity set out in paragraph 10 of the Rome Statute’s Preamble and Article 1. On this basis, Israeli authorities have opened investigations and conducted prosecutions in an attempt to demonstrate that domestic mechanisms are addressing alleged violations.

However, these proceedings have been widely criticized for lacking independence and impartiality, and are often viewed as largely formal measures intended to limit international scrutiny before the ICC. A 2021 report by the International Commission of Inquiry raised serious concerns regarding the absence of transparency and fairness, casting doubt on the effectiveness of domestic accountability mechanisms in delivering justice for Palestinian victims.

In relation to compliance with international legal standards, including the Geneva Conventions and the Rome Statute, assessments by the Israeli Supreme Court and the Turkel Commission indicate that domestic legislation does not adequately criminalize international crimes. The legal framework has been described as insufficient, particularly due to the limited independence of the judiciary from military and political influence³¹.

4. CONCLUSION

Civilian protection in armed conflicts is a cornerstone of international humanitarian law, aimed at limiting the humanitarian consequences of war and preserving human

dignity. Within this framework, international criminal responsibility operates as a mechanism to hold individuals accountable for serious international crimes and to reinforce the principle of ending impunity.

This study examined the legal characterization of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, analyzed the main violations committed against civilians in Gaza, and identified the legal foundations of international criminal responsibility and the mechanisms available for prosecuting such crimes under international humanitarian and criminal law. It also found that the effectiveness of these mechanisms is significantly constrained by legal and political obstacles that continue to hinder the achievement of international justice and adequate protection for victims.

-Key Findings

1. The protection of civilians in armed conflict is a binding obligation under the Geneva Conventions and customary international humanitarian law.
2. The legal classification of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict triggers the application of international humanitarian law and its protective regime for civilians in occupied territories.
3. Acts such as wilful killing, unlawful targeting of civilian objects, and forced displacement may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity when their legal elements are satisfied.
4. The International Criminal Court represents a key judicial mechanism for individual criminal responsibility, although its effectiveness is influenced by legal and political constraints.
5. The principle of complementarity gives priority to national jurisdictions, provided that domestic proceedings are genuine, independent, and effective; otherwise, concerns regarding adequacy and impartiality arise.
6. Effective international criminal justice depends on genuine international cooperation and political will to ensure uniform application of international law without selectivity.

-Recommendations

1. Strengthen international criminal accountability mechanisms to prevent impunity for serious international crimes.
2. Enhance the independence and operational effectiveness of the International Criminal Court.
3. Ensure strict compliance with international humanitarian law, particularly regarding the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure.
4. Support documentation efforts, evidence collection, and the protection of victims and witnesses.
5. Improve international cooperation to ensure the enforcement of judicial decisions and the prosecution of perpetrators of international crimes.

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