

UN Aid Succeeds When R2P Fails: Gaza's Pillar Two Lesson, 2023-2026

Lalrinfeli¹

Abstract:

This paper examines the nature of the humanitarian efforts of the United Nations in Gaza from 2023-2026. It demonstrates ways in which Pillar Two of the Responsibility to protect (R2P) ended up leading when Pillar Three, coercive protection failed. Through a case-study prism developed on UN agencies reports and some sources, it captures the process by which UNRWA, OCHA, WHO and other actors distributed life-saving assistance even when the population was under blockade. The review shows that civilians are driven to survive through intensive restrictions due to non-coercive assistance, local ownership, and coordination. These findings suggest that the capacity-building and humanitarian efforts to Pillar Two shortened the number of civilian casualties and maintained minimal services operating, which works against the belief that R2P is based on military intervention and demonstrates that consistent humanitarian interventions can protect civilians in desperate conflict areas.

Keywords: Responsibility to Protect, Pillar Two, Gaza, Humanitarian Aid, UNRWA, WHO

Introduction

The concept of sovereignty being a form of responsibility rather than a right became a game-changer in the international relations process with the R2P doctrine which was unanimously accepted at the 2005 UN World Summit (UNGA, 2005; Evans, 2008). The births of R2P were the results of the experience of Rwanda or Srebrenica, when the international community was not able to protect people, and therefore further crises were not going to replace such crimes as genocide, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes with crimes against humanity (ICISS, 2001; Bellamy, 2015). The framework is founded on three pillars that are mutually reinforcing: Pillar One (state duty), Pillar Two (international assistance) and Pillar Three (collective action), (Ban Ki-mun, 2009). However, the credibility of R2P has suffered due to lack of proper implementation of Pillar Three, which is the decisive action by the UN Security Council, which has been mostly put in limbo (Hehir, 2019; Bellamy, 2023). The most conspicuous case of R2P failure is the Gaza conflict of the period

¹ 4th year, BA program (History + Political Science) Ram Lal Anand College, University of Delhi

between October 2023 and January 2026. Gaza has suffered one of the most severe humanitarian disasters of the 21st century, with more than 71, 000 Palestinian casualties (approximately 70% of the population). Nearly 78 percent of health infrastructure was destroyed, people were displaced on a massive scale, food, water, and medical supplies were blocked deliberately (Palestinian Ministry of Health, 2026; UNHRC, 2025).

However, when one refers to Gaza as an R2P failure, an important factor is being overlooked. In the event that the coercive protection mechanism failed, Pillar Two, international assistance and capacity support, was exceptionally resilient. UN agencies maintained massive humanitarian interventions through aerial raids and siege. UNRWA was providing food aid (approximately 1.9 million individuals on a daily basis) through over 400 distribution centres. OCHA was operating convoys although access had been denied. WHO was maintaining dozens of partially functioning hospitals (UNRWA, 2026; OCHA, 2025; WHO, 2026). Although these efforts did not stop the violence, they reduced the number of civilian deaths and ensured the minimum to survive (MSF, 2024; ICRC, 2024).

This paper traces the achievements of UN humanitarian assistance under Pillar Two of the R2P doctrine in the case of the Gaza crisis (2023-2026) in which the Pillars One and Three failed due to lack of sovereignty and vetoes by the Security Council. It starts with an introduction to the three pillars of R2P and the case of Gaza that provides a test case by stating that the free consent help provided under Pillar Two was resilient and life-saving. It is then broken down in the analysis section through a theoretical background of Pillar Two (capacity-building, cooperation, and the concept of sovereignty as responsibility) and a Gaza-specific excursion into the sovereignty emptiness, UN operational succeeds (e.g., UNRWA food aid, OCHA coordination, WHO health support), and capped off with implications, challenging R2P's focus on force.

Pillar Two Theory

One of the significant normative and operational changes in the contemporary world is identified as Pillar Two of the Responsibility to Protect. Although Pillar One narrows down the fundamental responsibility of states to protect their citizens against genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, Pillar Two does not negate the fact that states tend to fail not by deliberate intentions but by their structural inadequacy like weak institutions, financial constraints, political of lodged strife or protracted conflict (ICISS). This pillar states that prevention and capacity-building are the keys to protection and makes the international community increase efforts to make the states fulfil the protective obligations focusing on cooperative, non-coercive, and preventative processes. At the core, Pillar Two shifts the focus on reactive

responses to crisis to structural prevention. Conventional humanitarian intervention is dominated by action after the violence has followed. Pillar Two offers a proactive model that makes governance, security, and administration resilient, prior to the atrocities going out of control. The rationale is that weak states tend to have the means, skills, or stability to avert perpetrated human rights in large scale. Hence, the international aid is no longer represented as an intervention but rather as a collaboration that helps restore the state sovereignty by empowering the capacities but rather as a burden of maintaining civilians as a requirement of sovereignty. And lastly, Pillar Two concerns partnership and joint involvement. It emphasizes cooperation among governments on a national level, global institutions, regional players and civil society. Such assistance can be in the forms of technical skills, legal reform, training on security, early-warning systems, financial assistance and direct humanitarian services. According to the 2009 UN report, Implementing the Responsibility to Protect, Pillar Two has been seen to operate through situational-specific, flexible approaches to enhance national protection capabilities. Notably, this report rejected the notion that R2P is a strict pathway with Pillar Two being the last stage before the use of coercive intervention. All three pillars are complementary and may run concurrently to allow actors to customize the protection approaches to the dynamics of the conflict at hand.

The other significant theoretical aspect of Pillar Two is everything about prevention as a long-term security approach. In essence, experts state that mass atrocities do not appear out of the thin air, most of the time they are preceded by such red flags as institutional discrimination, failure of governance, or increased communal violence. Pillar Two attempts to address these underlying issues by focusing on early intervention and structural reforms before they run out of control into massive humanitarian crises. That pre-emptive emphasis is consistent with the larger change in the international security thinking that is beginning to place a premium on human security and sustainable governance as opposed to the historic military reaction of the state. So, Pillar Two is contributing to expanding the purposes of international protection as the emergency interventions to daily Risk Management and resilience building. In addition, Pillar Two highlights the plunge toward institutionalisation of humanitarian governance in world politics. Large actors such as the UN, WHO and regional humanitarian networks have established coordination mechanisms in which they can provide massive assistance in areas that are fragile and those that are rotated by the conflict. They tend to operate on decentralised implementation patterns that introduce the local actors, community-based organisations, and national administration structures. This representative government arrangement provides greater legitimacy to and effectiveness of protection activities by fusing international funds with local expertise and social contacts. How civilian security is a multi-level game of cooperation more and more than it is based on the state is demonstrated by the hybrid model. Pillar Two

nonetheless has encountered some theoretical difficulties in spite of all its nuggets. Avoiding dependency on external assistance provided by aid, critics complain, protection erected on aid may inevitably reinforce local governance development. People also indicate that humanitarian assistance is not sufficient in addressing the political factors that lead to mass violence, particularly where state or non-state involved parties opt to sustain atrocities. Added to these, the ability to access, sustain funding, and local authorities willing to collaborate with international orgs is the key to the success of Pillar 2. The restrictions demonstrate that although Pillar Two can alleviate misery and enhance protection capacities, it will not be able completely to substitute the system of political responsibility or conflict management.

Nevertheless, Pillar Two continues to be a major component to the puzzle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as it provides a politically feasible and ethically viable method of providing the protection of civilians. In numerous contemporary wars, geopolitical divisions interfere with coercive implementation, which makes the peaceful assistance of the humanitarian intervention the most possible way of interacting internationally. The emphasis on prevention, partnership, and capacity building. Pillar two increases the scope of operation of R2P and supports its normative dedication to defending human life. The conceptual foundation of Pillar 2, thus, reflects a more substantial change in international protection modes to intervention-oriented security, to the collaborative humanitarian protection policy and sustainable civilian protection measures.

Sovereignty to Survival: Gaza as a Structural Test Case

A good example of super-complexity of R2P to this framework is the Gaza Strip of 2023 to 2026. Historically, R2P assumes the existence of a sovereign state in the capacity to take care of civilians in terms of Pillar One. Gaza does not qualify that measure of power, legitimacy, and the ability is divided between various actors. Israel is the occupying power exercising significant territorial and security control, waiting Hamas is, in practice, a government body, which is not currently recognised or legitimate internationally. This fragmented rule left a sovereignty gap in which no one has the legal responsibility or the physical capacity to take care of civilians. Such was that the fundamental R2P premise of states being the primary defenders of their nation came awry in the lasting conflict and power struggle of Gaza. The political gridlock of Pillar Three contributed negatively to the failure of Pillar One in Gaza. R2P assumes that once a state is unable to do the protection of its people, the international community, through the UN Security Council is able to intervene. However, enforcement actions, such as ceasefire mandate, sanction, and peace keeping forces, were thwarted by vetoes of permanent members. The deadlock over the Security Council underscored the fact that geopolitical interests continue to override the necessity of humanitarian action, which supports the argument that the implementation of R2P remains subject to the great-power agreement.



Gaza indicates a genuine shortcoming therefore in the institutional design of R2P despite the moral and legal responsibilities established by the doctrine. The implementation is susceptible to international politics of power - particularly at strategic locations or with the involvement of allies in the scenario. Under an environment where sovereign protection failed and forceful enforcing paid no longer was possible, the civilian survival depended massively on the operationalisation of Pillar Two. The international actors in the humanitarian activities, particularly the UN agencies intervened to play the role of governance that the states normally play. Released broken supply chains were substituted with food distribution networks, emergency health care systems compensated the destroyed medical infrastructure and humanitarian coordination networks balanced the failures in administration and institutions. This change is part of an even greater change in the direction of global governance whereby international organisations are increasingly playing protecting roles when the states are weak or when the sovereignty of the states is challenged. The case of the city of Gaza thumps its nose at the state-centric, traditional conception of protection by demonstrating that it is possible to keep the civilians alive due to international humanitarian capacity rather than legitimate sovereign power.

To add to this, Gaza reveals an indication that the concept of sovereignty as responsibility has transformed out of the framework in which it initially existed. Theoretically, R2P repackages sovereignty as being conditional on the need to protect population. As practice Gaza demonstrates that when government collapses or is divided one-way international help can easily be the major mode of responsibility execution. Foreign humanitarian assistance never abolished sovereignty, but instead it partially offset such a deficiency, allowing necessary protective functions to continue, irrespective of political and legal grey spots. This affirmation in favour of the perception of the fact that contemporary humanitarian governance is becoming progressively operated by means of hybrid types involving international organizations and non-international actors ranging between local and non-local and collaborating towards the maintenance of the safety of civilians. Gaza as a structural test case, in general, reveals the inadequacies as well as the adaptive abilities of the R2P doctrine. Although the crisis illustrates the vulnerability of state-based, as well as, enforcement-based protection, it also displays the operational strength of aid-based protection. Transfer of sovereignty to survival in Gaza is accentuating the idea of how R2P is how it shifts into a more plastic model which places the protection of civilians in the centre of humanitarian cooperation in cases where more traditional methods fail to do so.



This change suggests that future usages of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) may be more related to the enhancement of international humanitarian infrastructure, decentralized strategies of implementation or the development of the capacity-building initiatives as opposed to the use of coercive intervention solely.

Gaza Strip (2023-2026): United Nations Effective Operations.

During October 2023 to January 2026 the Gaza Strip endured one of the crucial humanitarian disasters in the modern history characterised by mass killings of civilians, mass displacement, almost complete infrastructure collapse, and extreme limitations of humanitarian aid. The United Nations agencies became the main ACT stakeholders, whose mission was to keep the civilians alive in the presence of violence and paralysis. Although enforcement of the idea of R2P is impaired by lack of consensus in the Security Council, proactive humanitarian deployment initiated by the UN proved the practicability of Pillar Two by offering direct services to people, facilitating other service providers and substituting capacity. The fundamental participant in this undertaking was the United Nations Relief and Works Agency to Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) that administered the central facilitate apparatus to the survival of the civilians. The supply of food to almost 1.911 million individuals per day, including regular blockage of supply lines, demolition of food-processing plants, and nonperiodic aid bans that applied to almost the whole population, relied on more than 400 supply points, was still carried out by UNRWA (UNRWA, 2026). This high movement was facilitated by adaptive logistics, distribution networks which were decentralized and the introduction of local Palestinian employees who were well grounded in the ground situation. To target vulnerable populations even during blockades, UNRWA divided large-scale deliveries into many small and agile operations. Besides the lifeline role of UNRWA, the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) had the key role in the coordination of humanitarian access and inter-agency response. Having to coordinate movements on constantly shifting frontlines, deal with bureaucratic hurdles, and respond to permission changes by the unfriendly regimes, OCHA had to negotiate convoy movements, access requests, and aid distribution on a need-to-need basis. These initiatives led to an all-time complicated number of aid initiatives in December 2025 OCHA said 86 humanitarian convoys (53 percent of which were successful) under the most adverse circumstances in history (OCHA, 2025). Although such a number depicts limited scope of aid delivery, it proves that even partial effectiveness had life-saving results. Active coordination of OCHA with UN and non-UN partners helped to prevent the overall fragmentation of the humanitarian mission and, in addition, allowed avoiding a complete collapse of the humanitarian work.

Another example of application of Pillar Two in Gaza is the maintenance of health services. By the middle of 2025, hundreds of attacks on medical facilities were documented, and the majority of hospitals were

destroyed or turned non-functional. The World Health Organization, in turn, took emergency-related measures to avoid collapsing the entire system and not to restore the usual operation. WHO kept 18-19 of the original 36 Gaza hospitals partially functioning and saved about half of the hospital bed by delivering trauma kits, emergency medicine supplies, mobile clinics and remote technical assistance (WHO, 2026). This intervention guaranteed further emergency operations, maternal healthcare, and containment of infectious diseases and thus prevented secondary mortality that is a common consequence of a conflict of the protracted nature. These successful operations had one common factor, the importance of local UN employees. Instead of only implementing externally prepared programs, Palestinian aid workers dictated operational policy, found points of entry, and reconfigured the aids to reflect variations in security. Their presence on the ground which they undertook at a great risk to themselves allowed the UN to continue even when international personnel were limited. This local ownership criticized traditional perspectives of humanitarian action as an all-encompassing outside factor, highlighting the importance of decentralized action in threatening situations. Transparency and sharing of data were another major consideration. Both UNRWA and OCHA reported access denials, delivery results, destruction of infrastructure, and population requirements in a systematic way. Frequent information to the people ensured that the donors, member states, and the rest of the world were aware of the organization and hence assisted the organization in operational planning and responsibility. The openness has stopped misinformation and has maintained international attention in spite of political polarisation. Information in this case itself became a barrier to consolidation, enhancing the vision of humanitarian involvement. These joint efforts went beyond the actions of relief and served as some protection against political alternative to political resolution. The fact that UN agencies were unable to stop the violence and apply international law, still contributed to the fact that the numbers of civilian casualties were as minimal as possible and some of the living conditions were maintained, as well as, this prevented the complete destabilization of the social and institutional mechanisms within Gaza. The case of Gaza shows that Pillar Two in its operationalized form: locally-based, coordinated and responsive humanitarian intervention can be used to mitigate effects of mass violence when even military means do not work.

Conclusion

The Gaza crisis (2023 -2026) demonstrates how there are weaknesses in the organizational structure of the Responsibility to Protect framework. The impossibility of the identified authorities to safeguard civilians and the inability of the United Nations Security Council to take action demonstrate that Pillar One and Pillar Three are still too geopolitical drained and disputed sovereignty issues. These breakdowns support the main

thesis of this paper is based approaches to R2P do not usually work politically in the modern war where the interest of great powers prevails, ignoring the humanitarian crisis. Simultaneously, the Gaza case confirms the thesis statement that Pillar Two is the operationally feasible and ethically sustainable aspect of R2P. The United Nations humanitarian agencies played the role of not only a provider of relief but also in place of the lack of effective state authority, they acted as alternative protection. By means of mass food delivery, emergency shelter, and humanitarian access, the UN agencies minimized the death of civilians and avoided the complete collapse of the society. This shows that significant civilian protection is possible through prolonged humanitarian involvement and not military intervention. The crisis however brings to the fore the shortcomings of protection through the assistance. Though Pillar Two was able to maintain survival conditions, it was unable to prevent violence and fix the political factors that led to the conflict. Accordingly, Gaza reveals that R2P should be viewed as a wider concept of international responsibility that would involve the protection of humanitarian care in addition to greater political accountability and conflict management. This balance is the key to the long-term reliability of R2P, as long as humanitarian intervention does not override the pursuit of political solutions in the long term, it should continue to sustain the life of civilians.

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