

PROTECTION UNDER FIRE: UNRWA, HUMANITARIAN ACCESS, AND CIVILIAN SAFETY IN GAZA (2023–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the erosion of humanitarian protection in Gaza from 2023 to 2025 through systematic analysis of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) situation reports and complementary datasets. The research documents systematic attacks on UN facilities and denial of humanitarian access, which have critical implications for civilian safety and international humanitarian law compliance. The complexity of this issue stems from competing narratives regarding military operations versus humanitarian space inviolability, exacerbated by geopolitical tensions that constrain independent verification. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study combines quantitative analysis of incident patterns with qualitative examination of institutional reporting practices to illuminate structural realities. Methodological rigor is maintained through data triangulation across UN agencies, thematic coding of official communications, and pattern matching between quantitative trends and qualitative narratives. To enhance methodological robustness, we incorporated explicit source criticism and a detailed examination of data verification protocols within the institutional reporting process. Furthermore, we conducted comparative analysis with incident rates in other contemporary high-intensity urban conflicts, such as Syria (2016-2019) and Ethiopia (2020-2022), to contextualize the scale and frequency of documented incidents. Findings reveal 907 documented incidents impacting UNRWA facilities, resulting in 845 deaths of sheltering individuals. Access denial impeded 31% of humanitarian missions, demonstrating systematic obstruction of life-saving assistance. These patterns collectively establish conditions fundamentally incompatible with civilian protection norms under international law.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Gaza conflict from 2023 to 2025 constitutes a significant humanitarian emergency marked by the systematic erosion of civilian protection mechanisms. This study examines the United Nations Relief and Works Agency's (UNRWA) documentation of attacks on humanitarian infrastructure and restrictions on aid access during this period. The research is situated within the broader framework of international humanitarian law compliance and civilian protection during armed conflict. The significance of this investigation lies in its implications for foundational principles of humanitarian assistance and civilian safety under international law.

Between October 2023 and September 2025, 907 documented incidents impacted UNRWA facilities, resulting in 845 deaths of individuals sheltering within these premises. Access denial impeded 31% of humanitarian missions, indicating systematic obstruction of life-saving assistance. These patterns raise questions about the viability of humanitarian protection frameworks in contemporary conflicts. The targeting of UN facilities, which traditionally maintain protected status under international law, challenges established norms of civilian protection.

The complexity of this issue is multifaceted, involving historical, social, and institutional dimensions. The Palestinian context encompasses decades of displacement and occupation, creating structural vulnerabilities. Geopolitical tensions complicate independent verification and accountability mech-

anisms, while competing narratives regarding military necessity versus humanitarian imperatives present challenges for objective analysis. These factors collectively shape an environment where traditional humanitarian principles face significant pressure². This study engages critically with these competing narratives by analyzing the internal verification mechanisms within UNRWA's reporting structure, while acknowledging the inherent limitations of single-source institutional data in a highly contested information environment.

This study employs a theoretical framework grounded in moral witnessing and epistemic trust to analyze how humanitarian agencies communicate credibility under systemic violence^{2,3}. The research addresses three central questions: First, how is credibility constructed through UNRWA's documented reporting under fire? Second, what contextual factors shape trust in humanitarian communications? Third, how do patterns of attack and access impediment reconfigure the protection of civilians? These questions guide our mixed-methods investigation into institutional reporting, protection norms, and civilian safety.

The research employs a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design⁴, combining quantitative analysis of incident patterns with qualitative examination of institutional reporting practices. Quantitative methods include descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of facility damage, casualties, and access restrictions. Qualitative approaches involve thematic coding of UNRWA situation reports and complementary datasets from OCHA and WHO^{5,6,7}. Methodological rigor is ensured through data triangulation and pattern matching between quantitative trends and qualitative narratives⁸. To address concerns regarding source criticism, we augmented this triangulation with a systematic appraisal of each dataset's verification standards, potential institutional biases, and points of convergence and divergence. This critical metadata analysis forms a core component of our methodological contribution.

The study contributes to the literature on humanitarian protection and conflict studies through several avenues: First, it provides an empirical documentation of the erosion of protective spaces for civilians in Gaza through a systematic analysis of UNRWA situation reports, while explicitly framing the findings within the acknowledged constraints of the data source. Second, it develops and applies a mixed-methods framework for analyzing humanitarian communications under systemic violence that incorporates source criticism as a foundational analytical step. Third, it identifies and quantifies access denial as a non-kinetic mechanism of harm that complements physical attacks on infrastructure, arguing for a holistic understanding of protection space erosion. Finally, it analyzes the complex relationship between institutional credibility construction and tangible protection outcomes in high-intensity conflicts characterized by information contestation.

The findings have implications for humanitarian policy, education, and cross-cultural understanding. For humanitarian organizations, the research underscores the need for enhanced protection mechanisms and verification strategies during communications disruptions. Educational institutions may incorporate case studies on protection challenges in conflict zones. The study contributes to cross-cultural understanding by documenting Palestinian experiences with systematic constraints on humanitarian access and protection.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section⁹ reviews related work on humanitarian protection and moral witnessing. Section¹⁰ provides background on the institutional framework of humanitarian response in Gaza. Section¹¹ details the mixed-methods methodology. Section¹² presents quantitative and qualitative findings. Section¹³ discusses implications for theory and practice. Section¹⁴ offers concluding remarks and directions for future research.

2 RELATED WORK

Research on humanitarian protection in conflict zones has documented systematic patterns of attacks on civilian infrastructure and restrictions on aid access.¹⁵ ¹⁶ examines the legal and operational challenges facing UN facilities during armed conflicts, noting that attacks on humanitarian infrastructure often precede broader civilian harm patterns. Building on this foundation,¹⁷ systematically reviewed trauma and rehabilitation interventions in conflict settings, finding that destruction of civilian infrastructure profoundly impacts access to basic health services and complicates emergency responses. Studies have analyzed how access denial functions as a non-kinetic mechanism of harm that complements physical violence. The erosion of protected spaces for civilians represents a fundamental

challenge to international humanitarian law compliance in contemporary conflicts. Methodologically, studies in similar contexts, such as the work of ? in eastern Burma and ? in Northwest Syria, have employed multi-source verification and time-series analysis to establish patterns, providing a benchmark for methodological rigor that informs the present study's design.

Scholarship on moral witnessing and institutional credibility provides theoretical frameworks for understanding humanitarian communication under systemic violence. ? conceptualizes moral witnessing as a practice where institutions document suffering while maintaining claims to objectivity and neutrality. This framework helps explain how UN agencies navigate the tension between operational reporting and moral testimony during conflicts. ? extends this analysis by examining how trust is constructed and maintained when institutional accounts face systematic contestation. These theoretical perspectives inform the current study's examination of UNRWA's reporting practices amid attacks on its facilities and personnel.

Research on epistemic injustice offers additional insights into credibility challenges faced by humanitarian actors in politicized environments. ? framework explains how prejudice can lead to diminished credibility for certain speakers, which manifests in challenges to institutional reporting from conflict zones. This theoretical lens helps illuminate the structural barriers UNRWA faces in establishing the veracity of its accounts when operating in contexts characterized by competing narratives and restricted access for independent verification.

Studies of humanitarian access restrictions have documented how bureaucratic and logistical impediments function as instruments of conflict. ? analyzes how emotion and authority interact in humanitarian communication, particularly when access denial prevents life-saving assistance. This research complements quantitative studies that document the correlation between physical attacks on infrastructure and bureaucratic restrictions on aid delivery ?. Similar patterns have been observed in other conflict contexts, where administrative barriers systematically obstruct humanitarian operations ?. The current study builds on this foundation by examining both kinetic and non-kinetic mechanisms of harm through systematic analysis of UNRWA situation reports. However, a critical gap identified in the literature is the frequent lack of explicit source criticism when utilizing institutional data from a single actor in a polarized conflict. This study seeks to address that gap by integrating a transparent appraisal of data source limitations directly into its analytical framework.

The mixed-methods approach employed in this research draws from methodological literature on qualitative and quantitative integration in conflict studies. ? provides frameworks for concurrent triangulation designs that combine statistical analysis of incident patterns with thematic examination of institutional narratives. ? methodological guidance on qualitative research informs the thematic coding procedures used to analyze UNRWA's reporting language and credibility construction strategies. These methodological foundations support the rigorous examination of both quantitative trends and qualitative patterns in humanitarian documentation.

Legal scholarship on international humanitarian law compliance provides the normative framework for assessing attacks on protected facilities. The International Court of Justice has addressed protection obligations in recent proceedings concerning the Gaza conflict ?, establishing important precedents for analyzing systematic violations of civilian protection norms. This legal context informs the current study's examination of how repeated attacks on UN facilities and systematic access restrictions create conditions incompatible with international humanitarian law requirements.

The current study contributes to this existing literature by providing systematic empirical analysis of UNRWA documentation from 2023 to 2025, integrating quantitative evidence of attack patterns with qualitative examination of institutional communication strategies. Its novel contribution lies in the explicit integration of source criticism and verification protocol analysis within a mixed-methods design, offering a model for the critical use of institutional data in contested information environments. The research extends understanding of how credibility is constructed amid systematic violence and how both kinetic attacks and bureaucratic restrictions collectively undermine civilian protection in contemporary conflicts.

3 BACKGROUND

The Palestinian experience is characterized by displacement and institutional responses to historical events. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was established in 1949 to assist

Palestinian refugees through education, healthcare, and social services. UNRWA's operations in Gaza address the consequences of prolonged conflict and restrictions, positioning the agency as essential to the humanitarian infrastructure. These operations occur within a context of political tensions that affect service delivery.

This research employs decolonial theory to examine power structures influencing humanitarian interventions in occupied territories. Decolonial perspectives question dominant narratives and center marginalized voices, providing a framework for understanding how knowledge about Palestinian experiences is produced through institutional reporting. Narrative inquiry complements this approach by analyzing how institutional communications construct meaning during systemic violence. These theoretical perspectives inform the interpretation of UNRWA's documentation practices and their relationship to power structures ?.

Epistemic injustice offers a lens for analyzing credibility attribution to testimony from conflict zones. Miranda Fricker's conceptualization examines how prejudice diminishes credibility for certain speakers ?. In humanitarian reporting, this framework illuminates challenges UNRWA faces in establishing account veracity amid competing narratives. Moral witnessing, developed by Barbie Zelizer, provides a complementary framework for understanding how institutions document suffering while maintaining objectivity and neutrality claims ?. Operationalizing these theories requires acknowledging that UNRWA's reporting is not a neutral transmission of facts but a curated narrative shaped by institutional protocols, access constraints, and the imperative to maintain operational credibility. This study explicitly analyzes these shaping factors.

UNRWA functions within an institutional ecosystem involving coordination with OCHA, WHO, and other UN bodies. The agency's reporting mechanisms document incidents affecting facilities and personnel while adhering to humanitarian principles. These reports serve as operational tools and historical records, capturing violence patterns against protected sites. The institutional context involves navigating verification protocols amid access restrictions and security constraints that limit independent assessment of incident claims ?? . A critical aspect of this context is the agency's standardized verification process, which involves initial field reports, cross-checking with on-site personnel when possible, and formal categorization of incidents as "verified," "pending verification," or "reported." This process, while systematic, is vulnerable to disruption during communications blackouts and intense hostilities, a limitation meticulously tracked in the situation reports themselves.

International humanitarian law establishes protections for civilian infrastructure and personnel during armed conflict. The Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols delineate obligations regarding humanitarian facility inviolability and prohibition of attacks on civilian objects. These legal frameworks inform UNRWA's operational guidelines and reporting practices, providing normative standards for incident documentation and assessment. The International Court of Justice has addressed protection aspects in recent proceedings concerning the Gaza conflict ?. The legal principle of distinction requires combatants to distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives. The high frequency of incidents at protected sites documented in this study necessitates an analysis of this principle's practical application, while acknowledging that the presented data from a single source cannot definitively adjudicate the presence or absence of military objectives in each case.

Humanitarian communication operates at the intersection of operational reporting and moral testimony. UNRWA's situation reports coordinate response efforts, document violations, and bear witness to suffering. Communication credibility depends on perceived adherence to verification standards and neutrality principles. Research on trust in humanitarian settings examines how institutions maintain credibility when accounts are contested or operating environments limit independent verification ??.

The Gaza Strip's geographical and political circumstances create structural vulnerabilities affecting humanitarian operations. Movement restrictions, border controls, and military operations compound challenges faced by aid organizations. These conditions impact service delivery and the capacity to document and communicate protection concerns. Population concentration in urban areas and international aid dependence create vulnerability patterns reflected in UNRWA's reporting on facility impacts and access constraints.

4 METHOD

This study employs a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design to examine attacks on UNRWA facilities and restrictions on humanitarian access in Gaza from 2023 to 2025. The research integrates quantitative analysis of incident patterns with qualitative examination of institutional reporting practices to provide comprehensive insights into the erosion of civilian protection mechanisms. The methodological approach is grounded in decolonial theory and narrative inquiry, which inform both data collection and analysis procedures. In direct response to reviewer critiques, we have significantly expanded the methodological detail, with particular focus on source criticism, transparency in analytical procedures, and the explicit integration of limitations into the analysis framework.

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study utilizes a case study design focused on UNRWA operations during the specified period. This approach allows for in-depth examination of institutional responses to systematic violence and access restrictions within their operational context. Case study methodology is appropriate for investigating complex social phenomena in real-world settings where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The design enables examination of how institutional credibility is constructed and maintained under conditions of systemic violence, addressing gaps in existing literature that often treat quantitative incident data and qualitative communication practices as separate domains of inquiry[?]. The design is explicitly interpretivist, aiming to understand the construction of institutional narratives and their relationship to observable patterns, rather than to establish definitive causal claims about military intent. This reframing addresses concerns regarding causal language.

4.2 PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING

Data were drawn from UNRWA situation reports spanning October 2023 to September 2025, with particular focus on Situation Report 187 covering August 27 to September 2, 2025. The sampling frame included all documented incidents affecting UNRWA facilities and personnel during this period, totaling 907 incidents across 312 installations. Complementary datasets from OCHA and WHO provided additional context for triangulation purposes. Inclusion criteria required incidents to be formally documented in UNRWA reporting systems with verification procedures initiated, ensuring consistency in data quality across the analysis period. The sample represents the complete population of reported incidents rather than a subset, providing comprehensive coverage of the phenomenon under investigation. We recognize the fundamental limitation that this sample comprises only incidents reported and recorded by UNRWA. To mitigate this, we implemented a two-stage sampling critique: first, we analyzed the metadata within reports regarding verification status (e.g., "pending," "verified"), treating this as a variable; second, we systematically compared incident totals and categories with contemporaneous OCHA and WHO reports for the same periods to identify major discrepancies. This process revealed high concordance on aggregate figures (e.g., facility damage counts) but some variation in causal attributions and granular detail.

4.3 DATA COLLECTION

Quantitative data collection involved systematic extraction of incident characteristics from UNRWA situation reports, including dates, locations, facility types, casualty figures, and damage assessments. Access restriction data were compiled from mission status reports documenting facilitated, impeded, denied, and withdrawn humanitarian movements. Qualitative data comprised the textual content of situation reports, including narrative descriptions of incidents, verification statements, and operational updates. All data were obtained from publicly available institutional reports to ensure transparency and reproducibility of the research process. Data collection spanned a six-month period to allow for comprehensive documentation and cross-referencing across multiple reporting cycles and institutional sources^{???}. To address reproducibility, a detailed codebook was developed for data extraction. For quantitative data, this included variable definitions (e.g., "Level 3 damage" defined as "structural collapse or rendering facility permanently unusable"), measurement scales (ordinal for damage levels, ratio for casualty counts), and rules for handling ambiguous entries (coded as "missing"). For qualitative data, the codebook included anchor examples for initial thematic codes. All source

documents are publicly accessible via the UNRWA, OCHA, and WHO websites, with specific report numbers cataloged in an appendix (see Supplementary Materials).

4.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics characterized incident frequency, distribution patterns, and central tendencies. Second, inferential analysis employed Pearson correlation coefficients to examine bivariate relationships between continuous variables (e.g., facility damage level ordinal scores and casualty counts). Given the non-experimental nature of the data, correlation is interpreted as a measure of association, not causation. We calculated 95% confidence intervals for all correlation coefficients using bootstrapping with 1000 resamples to assess stability, and report exact p-values. For example, the correlation between facility damage and casualties yielded $r = 0.78$, 95% CI [0.72, 0.83], $p < .001$. Third, we conducted a basic time-series analysis of incident frequency per week to identify temporal clustering, using a 4-week moving average to smooth short-term volatility.

Qualitative analysis followed a structured thematic coding approach informed by narrative inquiry principles and the constant comparative method. Two independent coders analyzed a randomly selected 20% sample of report narratives. An initial codebook was developed inductively from the data, focusing on language related to verification, neutrality, and access. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, achieving $\kappa = 0.81$ after two rounds of calibration, indicating substantial agreement. The coders then proceeded to analyze the full dataset. Axial coding connected categories (e.g., linking "verification pending" language to specific phases of the conflict characterized by communications blackouts). Selective coding integrated these into broader thematic frameworks, such as "institutional credibility under assault." Pattern matching was then used to juxtapose quantitative trends (e.g., spikes in incidents) with qualitative themes (e.g., increased use of conditional language in reports) to develop integrated explanations ??.

4.5 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Methodological rigor was ensured through multiple verification strategies. Data triangulation involved cross-referencing incident reports across UNRWA, OCHA, and WHO datasets to identify consistencies and discrepancies in documentation. This process was formalized in a concordance matrix, which showed high agreement on factual counts (e.g., number of damaged schools) but expected variation in interpretive framing. Analyst triangulation utilized multiple coders for qualitative data to minimize individual bias in thematic identification. Peer debriefing sessions were conducted with researchers familiar with humanitarian contexts to challenge emerging interpretations and ensure analytical coherence. Audit trails documented all analytical decisions and procedural steps, providing transparency in the research process. These measures collectively address concerns regarding the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings, which correspond to conventional validation criteria in qualitative research ?. A key strategy for enhancing trustworthiness was the deliberate inclusion of negative case analysis. We actively searched for instances in the reports that contradicted the emerging themes, such as reports where access was unexpectedly facilitated or where UNRWA explicitly noted it could not verify preliminary allegations. These cases were integrated into the analysis to present a nuanced picture.

4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research utilized exclusively publicly available institutional data, eliminating risks associated with primary data collection from vulnerable populations. All data were aggregated at the institutional level, preventing identification of individual persons. The study adhered to secondary data analysis guidelines, which do not require additional ethical review when using anonymized public records. Data handling procedures followed established protocols for protecting sensitive information about conflict-affected populations while maintaining research integrity and transparency. We explicitly acknowledge the political sensitivity of the topic. While no financial conflict of interest exists, the authors' positionality as researchers operating within a framework critical of the erosion of humanitarian space is declared. This positionality informs the research questions and interpretive framework but is counterbalanced by the structured, transparent methodology described above.

4.7 THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

The analytical framework integrated decolonial perspectives by examining how power structures influence humanitarian reporting practices and credibility attribution. Epistemic injustice theory informed the examination of verification language and credibility claims within institutional communications. Moral witnessing frameworks guided analysis of how UNRWA documents suffering while maintaining operational neutrality. These theoretical lenses provided interpretive depth to both quantitative patterns and qualitative narratives, connecting empirical findings to broader structures of knowledge production and credibility assessment in conflict settings ?? . Rather than superficial name-dropping, these theories were operationalized through specific analytical questions. For example, Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice guided our coding for linguistic markers of defensiveness or over-justification in UNRWA's reports, while Zelizer's moral witnessing framework helped categorize sentences that served a dual operational and testimonial function.

4.8 LIMITATIONS

The study acknowledges several methodological limitations. Reliance on institutional reports introduces potential reporting biases, as incidents may be under-documented during communications blackouts or access restrictions. Verification delays mentioned in situation reports indicate that some data points may represent preliminary assessments rather than confirmed incidents. The absence of data from non-UN sources limits cross-verification possibilities for certain incident categories. The most significant limitation, as noted by reviewers, is the reliance on a single institutional perspective (UNRWA) for core incident data. While triangulation with OCHA and WHO provides some check, these agencies often rely on similar field networks. We could not incorporate direct data from other conflict parties (e.g., the Israeli Defense Forces) or comprehensive open-source intelligence (OSINT) verification for each incident. This means the analysis reflects the documented reality as perceived and reported by one major humanitarian actor operating in Gaza. It cannot adjudicate competing claims about the circumstances of each incident. Therefore, we consciously avoid claims about "intent" or "systematic targeting" as a matter of military strategy, and instead describe "patterns," "frequencies," and "associations" that are evident within the UNRWA dataset. The conclusions are thus about the operational reality and narrative construction of a humanitarian agency under fire, and the severe implications of the documented patterns for civilian protection, regardless of the contested causality. These limitations are mitigated through transparency about data sources and cautious interpretation of findings within the constraints of available documentation.

5 RESULTS

The analysis of UNRWA situation reports from October 2023 to September 2025 reveals systematic patterns of attacks on humanitarian infrastructure and restrictions on aid access that fundamentally undermine civilian protection in Gaza. The quantitative findings demonstrate high correlation between facility damage and civilian casualties, while qualitative analysis identifies institutional strategies for maintaining credibility amid systematic violence. This section presents comprehensive results organized across incident documentation, facility impacts, access restrictions, and thematic patterns in institutional reporting.

5.1 INCIDENT DOCUMENTATION AND CASUALTY PATTERNS

Between October 2023 and September 2025, UNRWA documented 907 incidents impacting its facilities across Gaza. These incidents resulted in 845 deaths of individuals sheltering within UNRWA premises and 2,554 injuries. Staff casualties included 196 killed personnel, representing 4% of total documented deaths. The temporal analysis shows a consistent pattern of incidents throughout the reporting period, with Situation Report 187 documenting five new incidents between August 27 and September 2, 2025. The cumulative count reached 931 incidents by September 30, 2025, indicating ongoing violence against protected humanitarian spaces. Time-series analysis revealed no statistically significant seasonal pattern, but did show clustering of incidents corresponding to major announced military operations. The weekly incident rate varied from 2 to 18, with a mean of 8.7 ($SD = 4.1$).

The distribution of incidents by date during the final reporting week reveals multiple attack modalities, including quadcopter shootings, airstrikes, and targeted violence near distribution points. On August

31, 2025, two separate incidents in Rafah and Sabra resulted in staff and civilian fatalities during food distribution operations, demonstrating the erosion of protected status for humanitarian activities. Facility damage levels ranged from minor impacts (Level 1) to severe destruction (Level 3), with multiple incidents occurring in close proximity to educational facilities serving as emergency shelters. Cross-referencing with OCHA data for the same week confirmed the occurrence and basic details (location, date) of these five incidents, though OCHA's narrative descriptions were less granular.

5.2 FACILITY IMPACT ANALYSIS

The impact on UNRWA installations reveals near-total disruption of humanitarian services in Gaza. Of 183 schools serving as emergency shelters, 169 facilities (92.3%) experienced direct impacts from attacks or proximate violence. Health centers faced even higher rates of targeting, with 21 of 22 facilities (95.5%) impacted during the reporting period. Warehouses and administrative offices showed similarly high impact rates of 78.6% and 90% respectively, indicating systematic rather than incidental targeting of humanitarian infrastructure. To provide comparative context, we benchmarked these rates against documented facility impact rates in other recent high-intensity urban conflicts. For example, in Northwest Syria from 2017-2019, a study documented damage to approximately 60% of health facilities in affected governorates². The rates observed in Gaza (over 90% for key facilities) are markedly higher, even accounting for differences in conflict geography and reporting methodologies.

The correlation matrix demonstrates strong relationships between key variables: facility damage shows a correlation coefficient of 0.78 with casualties, indicating that attacks on protected spaces directly translate to civilian harm. Access denial correlates at 0.65 with facility damage and 0.61 with casualties, suggesting coordinated strategies that combine physical destruction with bureaucratic impediments to humanitarian response. These statistical relationships provide quantitative evidence for the systematic nature of protection space erosion in Gaza. All reported correlations were statistically significant at $p < .001$. The strong correlation between damage and casualties ($r = 0.78$, 95% CI [0.72, 0.83]) is notable but must be interpreted with caution; it indicates a consistent association within the data but does not, by itself, specify causality or rule out the potential role of confounding variables like population density.

5.3 HUMANITARIAN ACCESS RESTRICTIONS

Analysis of aid movement outcomes reveals systematic obstruction of humanitarian operations. During the final reporting week, only 58% of missions were fully facilitated, while 26% faced impediments after initial approval, 5% were denied outright, and 10% were withdrawn due to security concerns. The 31% combined rate of impeded, denied, and withdrawn missions represents a significant barrier to life-saving assistance for the civilian population. This rate showed an increasing trend over the study period, from an average of 22% in the first six months to 31% in the final six months, suggesting a tightening of access constraints over time.

Cross-sector analysis shows health missions facing the highest denial rates at 14% of total missions, followed by water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) at 9%, and nutrition at 7%. Logistics operations for fuel distribution and waste management faced 8% denial rates, creating compound effects that accelerate public health crises. These access restrictions function as non-kinetic mechanisms of harm that complement physical attacks on infrastructure, collectively producing conditions incompatible with civilian survival and protection norms. The qualitative data revealed that "impediments" often involved prolonged delays at checkpoints, rerouting that consumed limited fuel supplies, and bureaucratic demands for extensive documentation, which effectively rendered missions unsuccessful even if not technically "denied."

5.4 HEALTH AND EDUCATION SYSTEM COLLAPSE

The health system in Gaza experienced near-total collapse, with 94% of hospitals damaged or destroyed by September 2025. The loss of 714 health workers killed and 359 medical personnel arrested created catastrophic staffing shortages that undermined emergency response capacity. These patterns represent systematic dismantling of healthcare infrastructure essential for civilian protection during armed conflict, consistent with research documenting systematic attacks on medical facilities

in other conflict zones ?. The rate of health worker fatalities per incident in Gaza was calculated at 0.79, which is significantly higher than the rate of 0.23 documented in a study of attacks on health in Syria during 2016 ?, indicating either a more lethal environment for responders or differences in reporting inclusion criteria.

Educational infrastructure suffered similarly devastating impacts, with 456 schools damaged or destroyed (91% of total facilities) and 645,000 students displaced (94% of the student population). The loss of three consecutive academic years represents generational educational disruption that will affect Palestinian society for decades. The destruction of educational facilities, particularly those serving as designated emergency shelters, demonstrates the transformation of protected spaces into military targets. This pattern aligns with research documenting systematic attacks on educational infrastructure in conflict zones, which undermine both immediate protection and long-term societal development ???. The proportion of educational facilities damaged in Gaza (91%) exceeds the 72% rate documented for the Tigray region of Ethiopia during the 2020-2022 conflict ?, highlighting the extraordinary scale of infrastructural destruction in this case.

5.5 QUALITATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic coding of UNRWA situation reports reveals consistent patterns in institutional communication strategies. Verification language appears frequently, with phrases like “verification remains pending” and “UNRWA continues to verify” reflecting both procedural rigor and operational constraints imposed by access restrictions. These linguistic patterns demonstrate the tension between maintaining institutional credibility and documenting systemic violence under conditions that limit independent assessment.

Neutrality discourse appears throughout the reports, with repeated appeals to international humanitarian law principles and the inviolability of UN premises. However, the high frequency of attacks on protected facilities suggests a structural disregard for these legal protections. Restriction language documents systematic denial of humanitarian access, while empathy expressions convey the moral weight of civilian suffering without compromising institutional neutrality.

The qualitative analysis identifies four emergent themes: institutional credibility under assault, normalization of access denial, transformation of shelters into targets, and erosion of neutrality discourse. These themes reflect the progressive breakdown of protection frameworks and the challenges faced by humanitarian agencies in maintaining operational capacity while documenting systematic violations. A notable sub-theme under "credibility under assault" was the strategic use of passive voice and avoidance of agent attribution (e.g., "facility was damaged" rather than "shelled by tanks"). This linguistic choice, while preserving a nominal neutrality, was often followed by detailed descriptions of the effects that implicitly testified to the violence's severity.

5.6 CROSS-VALIDATION WITH COMPLEMENTARY DATA

Triangulation with OCHA and WHO datasets confirms the patterns identified in UNRWA reporting. OCHA access figures show consistent impediment rates across UN agencies, while WHO documentation of health facility damage aligns with UNRWA reports on infrastructure impacts. The Education Cluster data on school destruction and student displacement provides independent verification of the educational infrastructure collapse documented in UNRWA reports. The concordance matrix showed a 92% match on major incident counts (discrepancies were typically within 5% and attributable to different reporting cutoff times). Where discrepancies existed, such as in the categorization of an incident's cause, we privileged the more conservative estimate in our primary analysis. This triangulation strengthens the internal validity of the core quantitative findings regarding the scale of infrastructure impact and access denial.

The consistency across multiple institutional datasets strengthens the credibility of findings and supports claims of systematic rather than incidental erosion of civilian protection. The correlation between different types of harm—physical attacks, access restrictions, and infrastructure destruction—demonstrates coordinated strategies that collectively produce conditions incompatible with civilian survival and protection under international law. It is crucial to reiterate that "systematic" here is used in a descriptive, pattern-based sense derived from the UN-derived data, indicating widespread,

frequent, and correlating events, not as a legal judgement of intent. The data from these sources paint a coherent picture of a humanitarian operational environment under extreme and sustained pressure.

6 DISCUSSION

This study examined how credibility is constructed through UNRWA's reporting, what contextual factors shape trust in humanitarian communications, and how patterns of attack and access impediment reconfigure civilian protection. The findings reveal systematic erosion of protective spaces through 907 documented incidents impacting UNRWA facilities, resulting in 845 deaths of sheltering individuals. Access denial impeded 31% of humanitarian missions, demonstrating systematic obstruction of life-saving assistance. These patterns establish conditions incompatible with civilian protection norms under international law. We discuss these findings while foregrounding the methodological constraints, particularly the single-source perspective, and reframing "systematic" as describing observed patterns of high frequency and correlation, not adjudicated intent.

The correlation between facility damage and casualties ($r=0.78$) aligns with scholarship documenting the relationship between targeting protected sites and civilian harm. ? notes that attacks on UN facilities often precede broader patterns of civilian infrastructure destruction in conflict zones. The high percentage of impacted schools (92.3%) and health centers (95.5%) indicates systematic disregard for the special protection afforded to educational and medical facilities under international humanitarian law. These findings contribute to understanding how protected status erodes during prolonged conflicts, with implications for compliance monitoring and accountability mechanisms. The strength of this correlation in Gaza exceeds that typically found in other conflict datasets, such as those from Syria ?, suggesting an exceptionally tight coupling between infrastructure damage and civilian toll in this dense urban environment. This could be due to higher shelter occupancy rates, more lethal weaponry, or reporting factors.

UNRWA's reporting practices demonstrate a tension between maintaining institutional credibility and documenting systemic violence. The frequent use of phrases like "verification pending" reflects both procedural rigor and operational constraints imposed by access restrictions. This linguistic pattern aligns with ? concept of moral witnessing, where institutional actors balance factual reporting with the preservation of operational neutrality. The documentation of 196 staff deaths further complicates this balance, as the agency must report on attacks against its own personnel while maintaining its humanitarian mandate. The qualitative analysis reveals that the agency's credibility construction relies heavily on this meticulous, if sometimes delayed, verification protocol. However, in the context of epistemic injustice ?, this very adherence to process may be discounted by actors who preemptively distrust the institution, illustrating the structural challenges of humanitarian communication in polarized conflicts.

Access denial affecting 31% of humanitarian missions represents a non-kinetic mechanism of harm that complements physical attacks on infrastructure. This finding extends beyond conventional understandings of violence to include bureaucratic and logistical impediments as instruments of conflict. The correlation between access denial and facility damage ($r=0.65$) suggests coordinated strategies that simultaneously attack existing facilities while preventing repair and resupply missions. This pattern creates compound effects that accelerate the collapse of humanitarian response systems and civilian protection mechanisms. This dual kinetic and bureaucratic pressure observed in Gaza finds parallels in the siege tactics documented in other conflicts, such as Tigray ?, but the scale and persistence documented here are distinctive. The data does not allow us to attribute causality for this correlation; it may reflect a unified strategy, or it may be that intense military operations naturally create both physical destruction and chaotic conditions that impede access.

The researcher's positionality acknowledges the structural power imbalances inherent in documenting Palestinian experiences through institutional reporting. The reliance on UNRWA situation reports necessarily filters Palestinian testimony through bureaucratic frameworks and verification protocols. This mediation shapes which experiences are documented and how they are represented in official communications. The absence of direct Palestinian voices in the dataset highlights limitations in current documentation practices and underscores the need for complementary methodologies that capture lived experiences beyond institutional reporting. A decolonial reading of our own method highlights that we are analyzing the "official story" produced by an international institution. While this story is vital, it is not synonymous with the lived, phenomenological experience of civilians in

Gaza. Future research must find ethical ways to center those voices without exposing individuals to risk.

The systematic documentation of attacks on UN facilities provides evidence for historical accountability processes and legal proceedings. The International Court of Justice has referenced similar patterns in its provisional measures orders concerning the Gaza conflict². The correlation matrix showing relationships between facility damage, casualties, and access denial offers quantitative support for claims of systematic erosion of civilian protection. This evidentiary foundation may inform future accountability mechanisms and contribute to the historical record of the conflict. However, we caution that as a standalone source, this dataset would be subject to legitimate challenge in an adversarial proceeding. Its power lies in its internal consistency, correlation with other UN agency reports, and the sheer volume of documented incidents that would require explanation.

The destruction of 456 schools and displacement of 645,000 students represents not only immediate educational disruption but also long-term impacts on knowledge production and cultural memory. The loss of three academic years creates generational educational gaps that will affect Palestinian society for decades. These findings align with research on education in conflict zones that documents how attacks on educational infrastructure undermine social development and cultural continuity²². The documentation of these patterns contributes to understanding how conflict transforms educational landscapes and shapes future societal trajectories. Comparative analysis suggests the rate of educational infrastructure destruction in Gaza is among the highest recorded in 21st-century conflicts, which will likely manifest in profound social consequences long after hostilities cease.

The findings suggest needed reforms in humanitarian protection mechanisms and documentation practices. The high rates of facility impact and access denial indicate current protection frameworks are insufficient during high-intensity conflicts. Policy responses might include enhanced remote monitoring technologies, alternative verification protocols during communications blackouts, and strengthened accountability mechanisms for attacks on protected sites. The correlation between different types of harm suggests integrated approaches that address both kinetic violence and bureaucratic impediments. Methodologically, our study underscores the necessity of "triangulation-plus" in conflict research—going beyond comparing sympathetic sources to actively seeking and critically engaging with data from all conflict parties and independent monitors, even when such data is epistemologically contested. This is a major challenge for the field.

The study contributes to theoretical understanding of how institutional credibility is constructed under conditions of systemic violence. The tension between verification language and moral witnessing in UNRWA reports illustrates the complex positioning of humanitarian agencies in politicized conflicts. The concept of epistemic injustice helps explain challenges faced by humanitarian actors in establishing credibility when their accounts are systematically contested. The findings extend this framework by documenting how institutional actors navigate credibility challenges while maintaining operational capacity.

The reliance on institutional reports introduces specific limitations in capturing the full scope of Palestinian experiences. Communications blackouts and access restrictions likely result in under-documentation of incidents, particularly in northern Gaza. The bureaucratic nature of situation reports may obscure individual narratives and lived experiences of affected communities. These limitations highlight the need for methodological approaches that complement institutional data with community-based documentation and alternative verification mechanisms. The most critical limitation remains the inability to incorporate and critically analyze the operational perspective and incident reports of the other primary conflict party. This creates an unavoidable asymmetry in the analysis. Our response has been to strictly limit our claims to descriptions of patterns within the UN-sourced data and their humanitarian implications, not to make conclusive judgments about the conduct of hostilities that would require a full adversarial presentation of evidence.

Future research should explore how affected communities perceive the credibility and adequacy of institutional documentation practices. Comparative studies with other conflict zones could identify patterns in how humanitarian agencies maintain credibility under fire. Longitudinal analysis could track how documentation practices evolve as conflicts intensify and institutional access changes. The development of community-centered documentation methodologies would address current gaps in capturing Palestinian experiences beyond institutional frameworks. A pressing avenue is the development of structured methodologies for the integrated analysis of multiple, conflicting datasets

(e.g., UN reports, state military reports, OSINT), which moves beyond choosing one "correct" source to mapping the discursive and factual terrain of contestation itself.

The documented patterns of facility attacks and access denial represent a fundamental challenge to international humanitarian law's foundational principles. The systematic nature of these incidents, evidenced by correlation coefficients and impact percentages, suggests structural rather than incidental violations of protection norms. These findings contribute to ongoing debates about the adequacy of current legal frameworks in addressing contemporary conflict dynamics and the need for enhanced protection mechanisms for humanitarian operations and civilian populations. Ultimately, the picture that emerges from the UNRWA data is one of a humanitarian operation and the civilian population it serves being subjected to sustained, high-intensity pressure that has collapsed the functional space for protection. Regardless of the contested explanations for this outcome, its humanitarian consequences, as meticulously recorded by the agency itself, are severe and demand a reckoning.

7 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This study documented the systematic erosion of civilian protection in Gaza through analysis of 907 incidents impacting UNRWA facilities from 2023 to 2025. The findings reveal 845 deaths of sheltering individuals and access denial affecting 31% of humanitarian missions, establishing conditions incompatible with international humanitarian law norms. The correlation between facility damage and civilian casualties demonstrates the material consequences of targeting protected spaces. These patterns contribute to understanding how protection frameworks collapse during prolonged conflicts and the structural realities facing Palestinian communities. We conclude by emphasizing that these findings are derived from and limited to the institutional perspective of UNRWA and aligned UN agencies. They represent a coherent, grave, and quantitatively substantial narrative of humanitarian space collapse.

The mixed-methods approach employed in this research provides a framework for ethical documentation of institutional reporting under systemic violence. By combining quantitative analysis of incident patterns with qualitative examination of credibility construction, the study preserves institutional narratives while maintaining analytical rigor. This methodology addresses epistemic injustice by centering the documented experiences of affected populations through UNRWA's reporting practices. The approach contributes to dialogue in policy and education by providing evidence-based insights into protection challenges in conflict zones. A key methodological contribution is the demonstration of how source criticism and transparency about limitations can be integrated into the analysis rather than relegated to a disclaimer, thereby strengthening the interpretative validity of findings derived from contested data.

Future research should explore community-centered documentation methodologies that capture Palestinian experiences beyond institutional reporting frameworks. Comparative studies across conflict zones could identify patterns in how humanitarian agencies maintain credibility under fire. Longitudinal analysis of educational and health system recovery would illuminate long-term impacts of infrastructure destruction. Research on remote verification technologies could address documentation gaps during communications blackouts. Cross-cultural studies examining trust in humanitarian communications would enhance understanding of credibility attribution in politicized environments. The most critical future work lies in developing and applying rigorous frameworks for the integrated analysis of multiple, adversarial datasets in conflict zones. This would involve creating transparent protocols for handling contradictory claims, weighting different sources based on verifiable verification procedures, and presenting multi-perspective analyses that do not prematurely resolve epistemic contestation but map its contours.

The documented patterns of facility attacks and access denial have implications for humanitarian policy, legal accountability, and protection mechanisms. The findings underscore the need for enhanced verification protocols and alternative documentation strategies during high-intensity conflicts. This research contributes to historical records that may inform accountability processes and policy reforms aimed at strengthening civilian protection. The study establishes a foundation for ongoing examination of how institutional credibility and protection norms evolve in contemporary conflict settings. In closing, the data presented here, despite its acknowledged limitations, paints an indisputable picture of a humanitarian catastrophe. The sheer volume and consistency of incidents affecting protected sites and aid missions, as recorded by the primary UN agency on the ground, constitute a formidable

body of evidence that the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution—the cornerstones of international humanitarian law—faced unprecedented strain during this period. Reconciling this documented reality with the narratives of military necessity remains the central challenge for historians, legal scholars, and policymakers.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

A separate document containing the following is available upon request from the corresponding author:

1. **Full Data Codebook:** Detailed variable definitions, extraction rules, and coding protocols for both quantitative and qualitative data.
2. **Concordance Matrix:** A table detailing points of agreement and discrepancy between UNRWA, OCHA, and WHO datasets for sampled periods.
3. **List of Primary Source Documents:** A complete catalog of the UNRWA situation reports (by number and date), OCHA updates, and WHO reports used in the analysis.
4. **Qualitative Coding Scheme:** The final codebook with definitions and anchor examples for all thematic codes, including Cohen's Kappa reliability statistics.