

Protection under Fire: UNRWA, Humanitarian Access, and Civilian Safety in Gaza (2023–2025)

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Paper Information

Paper Title: Protection under Fire: UNRWA, Humanitarian Access, and Civilian Safety in Gaza (2023–2025)

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1 AI Reviewer 1 - Comprehensive Review

Review of "PROTECTION UNDER FIRE: UNRWA, HUMANITARIAN ACCESS, AND CIVILIAN SAFETY IN GAZA (2023-2025)"

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\\ ** Step 1. Summary of the Paper**

This manuscript analyzes the erosion of humanitarian protection in Gaza from 2023 to 2025 through systematic examination of UNRWA situation reports and complementary UN datasets. The paper claims to document systematic attacks on UN facilities and denial of humanitarian access, with implications for civilian safety and international humanitarian law compliance. Using a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative analysis of incident patterns (907 documented incidents, 845 shelter deaths, 31\

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\\ ** Step 2. Evaluation Criteria**

\\\ **1. Originality / Novelty** **Score: 6/10**

The paper applies established mixed-methods approaches to a contemporary conflict context. While documentation of attacks on humanitarian infrastructure exists in other conflicts, the systematic

analysis of UNRWA's specific institutional reporting during this period provides temporal novelty. However, the theoretical frameworks (decolonial theory, moral witnessing, epistemic injustice) are well-established in humanitarian studies, and the core finding that attacks on protected spaces undermine civilian protection is not conceptually groundbreaking.

\\\\ **2. Scientific Rigor / Methodology** **Score: 5/10**

Major concerns: - **Single-source dependency:** Heavy reliance on UNRWA's own reporting creates inherent confirmation bias. The authors acknowledge this but fail to adequately address its implications for validity. - **Missing methodological details:** No information on intercoder reliability for qualitative analysis, sampling rationale for specific situation reports, or statistical significance testing for correlation coefficients. - **Unclear temporal scope:** The paper covers 2023-2025 but includes data through September 2025, suggesting either projection or very recent collection, raising questions about data completeness. - **No counter-narrative analysis:** Fails to systematically examine alternative explanations or conflicting reports that might challenge UNRWA's accounts.

\\\\ **3. Clarity \ Presentation** **Score: 7/10**

The paper is generally well-structured with clear section organization. However, several issues persist: - **Overuse of theoretical jargon:** Terms like "epistemic injustice" and "moral witnessing" are invoked frequently without sufficient operationalization. - **Citation inconsistencies:** Multiple placeholder citations (?, ??) throughout the text indicate incomplete referencing. - **Repetitive findings:** The same statistics (907 incidents, 845 deaths) appear multiple times without progressive analysis.

\\\\ **4. Reproducibility \ Transparency** **Score: 4/10**

Critical flaws: - No data availability statement or access information for the UNRWA situation reports. - Missing detailed coding schemes for qualitative analysis. - Insufficient description of correlation methodology (variables used, handling of missing data). - No replication materials or code provided.

\\\\ **5. Significance \ Impact** **Score: 8/10**

The topic addresses a critically important humanitarian crisis with implications for international law and policy. The systematic documentation of attacks on protected facilities could inform accountability mechanisms and humanitarian practice. However, the impact is limited by methodological constraints and the polarized nature of the conflict, which may limit objective reception across different stakeholder groups.

\\\\ **6. Ethics \ Integrity** **Score: 6/10**

The use of publicly available data avoids primary ethical concerns. However: - **Positionality statement** is superficial and doesn't adequately address how researcher perspectives might influence interpretation. - **Conflict of interest** disclosure is absent despite the politically charged nature of the topic. - **Limitations section** acknowledges data constraints but doesn't sufficiently address how they might affect conclusions.

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\\\\ ** Step 3. Specific Suggestions for Improvement**

\\\\ **Major Revisions Required:**

1. **Methodological diversification:** Incorporate independent verification sources (satellite imagery, journalist reports, alternative UN agency data) to triangulate UNRWA claims. 2. **Statistical rigor:** Provide p-values, confidence intervals, and detailed explanation of correlation calculations. Consider multivariate analysis to account for confounding factors. 3. **Theoretical integration:** Either substantially deepen the application of decolonial theory and epistemic injustice frameworks or remove superficial references. 4. **Comparative analysis:** Include brief comparison with other conflict zones to contextualize whether these patterns are unique or representative of broader trends.

\\\\ **Minor Revisions:**

1. Complete all missing citations and references. 2. Standardize presentation of statistics (consistent decimal places, clearer labeling). 3. Reduce repetitive phrasing and theoretical name-dropping. 4. Improve figure/table readability with clearer labels and legends.

\\\\ **Additional Analyses to Strengthen:**

1. Time-series analysis to identify patterns in attack frequency and intensity. 2. Geographic mapping of incident distribution. 3. Analysis of how reporting language changes over time as the conflict evolves. 4. Examination of how different types of facilities (schools vs. health centers) experience distinct patterns of attack.

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\\ ** Step 4. Final Decision \ Justification**

\\\\ **Overall Score: 5/10**

\\\\ **Recommendation: REJECT**

Justification:

This manuscript addresses a critically important topic with potential humanitarian and legal significance. However, fatal methodological flaws preclude publication in its current form. The near-total reliance on a single institutional data source (UNRWA's own reporting) without robust independent verification creates insurmountable validity concerns. While the authors acknowledge this limitation, they fail to implement adequate methodological safeguards against confirmation bias.

The statistical analysis lacks rigor (no significance testing, unclear variable construction), and the qualitative analysis suffers from insufficient methodological transparency. The theoretical frameworks are invoked superficially rather than being meaningfully integrated into the analysis.

The paper could become publishable with substantial revisions including: (1) incorporation of multiple independent data sources, (2) rigorous statistical analysis with proper testing, (3) deeper theoretical engagement, and (4) complete documentation of methods and data. However, in its present form, the methodological limitations are too fundamental to support the paper's strong conclusions about systematic patterns and their implications for international law.

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Reviewer 01 *Expert in Humanitarian Studies \ Conflict Research* [Journal Name]

2 AI Reviewer 2 - Critical Review

****Overall Assessment: Weak Reject (2/5)****

\\\ 1. Overall Impression ****Immediate Reaction:**** This manuscript presents a deeply concerning documentation of humanitarian space erosion in Gaza. However, as a scientific study submitted to a high-impact journal, it fails to meet the requisite standards of methodological rigor, objectivity, and critical analysis. It reads more as a well-structured advocacy report than a dispassionate scientific inquiry.

****Characterization:**** Incremental documentation with significant methodological flaws, presented with the framing of a breakthrough. The core findings are alarming, but the study's design and execution undermine its scientific validity and contribution.

****First Impression Strengths:**** * ****Important Topic:**** Addresses a critical, timely, and under-documented issue with significant implications for international humanitarian law (IHL). * ****Comprehensive Data Compilation:**** Systematically aggregates a large volume of data from UNRWA reports (907 incidents). * ****Clear Writing:**** The paper is generally well-written and logically organized.

****First Impression Concerns:**** * ****Critical Lack of Source Criticism:**** The entire analysis rests on a single, highly politicized source (UNRWA) without any meaningful critical appraisal of its potential biases, verification limitations, or inherent conflicts of interest. * ****Unsubstantiated Causal Claims:**** The language consistently implies systematic intent ("systematic attacks," "systematic obstruction") without providing evidence to distinguish correlation from causation or to rule out alternative explanations (e.g., proximity to military objectives, collateral damage in dense urban warfare). * ****Absence of Critical Counter-Evidence or Perspective:**** The paper operates within a single narrative framework, ignoring competing claims, reports from other state or non-state actors, or any analysis that would challenge the UNRWA dataset's primacy.

\\\ 2. Technical \ Scientific Assessment

****A. Problem Definition: Score: 4/5**** * The research question is clearly motivated and non-trivial. The erosion of humanitarian protection is a significant problem. The authors convincingly argue for its importance within the framework of IHL.

****B. Methodological Soundness: Score: 1/5**** * ****Unacceptable.**** The methodological framework is fundamentally flawed. Relying exclusively on one party's situation reports in an active, highly asymmetric conflict zone is a fatal design flaw for a study claiming "systematic analysis." There is no: * ****Source Triangulation with Adversarial Data:**** No attempt to cross-reference with Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) reports, open-source intelligence (OSINT) from groups like Bellingcat, or other independent conflict monitors. * ****Critical Assessment of Verification:**** The paper notes "verification pending" in reports but treats all documented incidents as factual without analyzing the verification process's robustness, failure rates, or potential for institutional bias. * ****Hidden Assumption:**** The entire paper assumes the UNRWA data is a complete and unbiased ground truth. This is a profound and unsupported assumption.

C. Results \ Evidence: Score: 1/5 * **Unacceptable.** The results are descriptive rather than analytical. * **Baselines:** There are no meaningful baselines. What is the expected rate of incidental damage in a high-intensity urban conflict against an enemy that embeds military assets in civilian infrastructure? Without this, claims of "systematic" patterns are unsubstantiated. * **Exaggeration:** The leap from descriptive statistics (X incidents, Y casualties) to claims of "systematic attacks," "systematic obstruction," and "conditions fundamentally incompatible with civilian protection norms" is a massive overreach not supported by the presented evidence. The correlation analysis (e.g., $r=0.78$ between damage and casualties) is statistically naive; this correlation is tautological in this context and does not prove intent. * **Reproducibility:** While the data sources are cited, the analysis lacks the critical skepticism required for true scientific reproducibility.

D. Contribution to the Field: Score: 2/5 * The contribution is limited to compiling and describing one side's dataset. It does not provide a novel analytical framework or a balanced empirical analysis that would advance scholarly understanding beyond what is already known to policymakers and humanitarian actors. Its utility to other researchers is limited by its methodological weaknesses.

E. Writing \ Presentation: Score: 4/5 * The paper is readable and well-structured. Figures and tables, while based on flawed data, are clearly presented.

F. Ethical \ Transparency Standards: Score: 3/5 * Using public data avoids primary ethical concerns. However, there is a significant transparency issue in not explicitly acknowledging the profound limitations and potential biases of the sole data source. The study practices "ethics washing" by adhering to formal secondary data protocols while building its entire argument on a potentially compromised foundation.

\\ 3. Strengths * Compiles a large, difficult-to-access dataset into a single analysis. * Applies a coherent, if flawed, mixed-methods approach. * Highlights a critically important humanitarian and legal issue.

\\ 4. Weaknesses **Major Flaws:** 1. **Monolithic Data Source:** The fatal flaw. The analysis is built entirely on UNRWA's data without critical appraisal or triangulation with adversarial or independent sources. 2. **Unsupported Causal Language:** The consistent use of "systematic" implies intent and coordination without evidence that rules out alternative explanations (e.g., conflict dynamics, proximity to legitimate military targets). 3. **Lack of IHL Nuance:** Fails to engage with the IHL principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution from the perspective of the attacking force, which is essential for a rigorous legal analysis. 4. **Tautological Correlation Analysis:** Presenting high correlation between damage and casualties as a finding is misleading; it is an expected relationship that does not illuminate causality or intent.

Minor Flaws: * The theoretical framing (decolonial theory, epistemic injustice) feels superficially applied and does not critically inform the methodology. * Some references are placeholder (e.g., "???"), indicating a draft state.

\\ 5. Recommendations for Improvement **Required for Any Future Submission:**

1. ****Radical Source Triangulation:**** The analysis must be re-run incorporating data from the IDF, major OSINT aggregators (e.g., ACLED, Bellingcat), and other UN agencies with potentially different reporting standards. The core of the paper should become a **comparative analysis of these different datasets**, identifying points of convergence and divergence. 2. ****Reframe Claims:**** Replace all claims of "systematic" intent with more accurate descriptions like "widespread," "frequent," or "extensive," unless intent can be rigorously demonstrated through the triangulated data (e.g., by ruling out the presence of military objectives at the time of attack). 3. ****Incorporate IHL Military Perspective:**** Integrate an analysis of the legal obligations and potential justifications from the perspective of the attacking force, based on their publicly stated rules of engagement and target selection processes. 4. ****Deepen Methodological Critique:**** Add a dedicated section that critically evaluates the limitations, potential biases, and verification challenges of **each** data source used, including UNRWA's.

****What Would Make It Acceptable:**** A revised manuscript that transforms from a presentation of one dataset to a genuine scientific inquiry that tests the validity and consistency of multiple, conflicting datasets pertaining to the same events. The contribution would then be a rigorous methodological framework for analyzing humanitarian data in politicized conflict zones, rather than a potentially biased summary of one stream of that data.

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\\\ 6. Verdict

****Final Score: 2/5 - Weak Reject****

****Justification:**** This paper documents a critically important subject but fails scientifically due to a fundamental and uncritical reliance on a single, contested data source. The burden of proof for claims of "systematic" violation of IHL is exceptionally high, and this manuscript does not meet it. The methodological approach is inappropriate for the claims being made, rendering the findings unreliable as a standalone scientific contribution. The path to acceptance requires a fundamental redesign of the study to incorporate and critically analyze multiple, adversarial data sources. In its current form, it is not suitable for publication in a Tier-1 scientific venue.

3 Human Reviewer

Reviewer: Amila

Scores (out of 10): - Question 1: 0.5 - Question 2: 1.5 - Question 3: 1.5 - Question 4: 0.75 - Question 5: 1 - Question 6: 0.5 - Question 7: 1.5

Total Score: 7.25 / 10

Reviewer Notes:

Submitted at: 2025-12-24 18:19:40

4 Aggregate Report

Aggregate Review Report

This report combines the assessments from all three reviewers:

Individual Scores: - AI Reviewer 1 (Comprehensive): 6.0 / 10 - AI Reviewer 2 (Critical): 0.0 / 10
- Human Reviewer (Amila): 7.25 / 10

Aggregate Score: 4.42 / 10

Overall Assessment: The paper received an average score of 4.42 out of 10 across all three reviewers.

Final Decision: Major Revision

Justification: The paper has potential but requires substantial improvements before it can be considered for publication.

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