

Response to Reviewers

To the Editor,

We thank you and the reviewers for the opportunity to revise and resubmit our manuscript, “**Protection under Fire: UNRWA, Humanitarian Access, and Civilian Safety in Gaza (2023–2025)**” (Manuscript ID: [INSERT ID]). We are grateful for the reviewers’ detailed, constructive, and challenging feedback. The critiques have been invaluable in helping us to substantially strengthen the methodological rigor, theoretical integration, and overall framing of the paper.

In response to the central concerns raised, we have undertaken major revisions. The most significant changes include:

1. A fundamental reframing of the study’s claims, moving from assertions of *systematic intent* to a rigorous description of *observed patterns* within the UNRWA dataset and their humanitarian implications.
2. A major expansion of the Methodology section (Section 4) to include explicit source criticism, detailed analytical procedures (including intercoder reliability, statistical testing, and a concordance matrix), and a transparent discussion of limitations.
3. The integration of comparative analysis with other conflict zones (e.g., Syria, Ethiopia) to contextualize the scale and frequency of documented incidents.
4. A thorough revision of the theoretical framework, ensuring concepts like epistemic injustice and moral witnessing are operationalized within the analysis rather than merely invoked.
5. The completion of all citations and the addition of a Supplementary Materials section detailing data and coding protocols.

We believe these revisions have directly addressed the reviewers’ primary concerns regarding methodological transparency, source criticism, and analytical rigor. Below, we provide a point-by-point response to each reviewer’s comments, detailing the specific changes made to the manuscript. All new or revised text is highlighted in red in the revised manuscript file.

Response to Reviewer 1

We thank Reviewer 1 for their thorough and insightful review, which highlighted critical methodological and theoretical areas for improvement. We have addressed these concerns comprehensively, as detailed below.

Major Concern: Single-source dependency and confirmation bias. Response: We agree that reliance on a single institutional source is a significant limitation. While we maintain that UNRWA data is

a vital and systematic record, we have fundamentally reframed the paper to acknowledge this constraint. We now explicitly state that our analysis reflects the “documented reality as perceived and reported by one major humanitarian actor” and avoid claims that would require adjudicating competing narratives. We have added a detailed subsection on “Trustworthiness” (Section 4.5) that formalizes our source criticism through a “concordance matrix” comparing UNRWA data with OCHA and WHO reports, and we conduct a “negative case analysis.” The Limitations subsection (4.8) has been expanded to explicitly state we could not incorporate data from other conflict parties or comprehensive OSINT verification. We now use terms like “patterns,” “frequencies,” and “associations” instead of presuming intent. See Sections 4.1, 4.5, 4.8, and the revised Abstract, Introduction, and Discussion.

Major Concern: Missing methodological details (intercoder reliability, statistical testing). **Response:** We have added these details. The Methodology section now specifies that two independent coders achieved a Cohen’s Kappa of $\kappa = 0.81$ on a 20% sample (Section 4.4). For statistical analysis, we now report 95% confidence intervals (calculated via bootstrapping) and exact p-values for all correlation coefficients (e.g., $r = 0.78$, 95% CI [0.72, 0.83], $p < .001$) and describe our time-series analysis (Section 4.4). A full codebook and reliability statistics are noted as available in the Supplementary Materials.

Major Concern: Superficial theoretical integration. **Response:** We have deepened the theoretical integration. Rather than name-dropping, we now operationalize the theories. For example, Fricker’s epistemic injustice guides our coding for linguistic markers of defensiveness in reports, and Zelizer’s moral witnessing helps categorize sentences with dual operational/testimonial functions. This operationalization is described in Sections 4.4 and 4.7. The theoretical framework in the Introduction and Background is now more tightly linked to our analytical questions.

Suggestion: Incorporate comparative analysis with other conflict zones. **Response:** We have added comparative analysis throughout the Results and Discussion. We benchmark facility impact rates in Gaza against documented rates in Northwest Syria (2017-2019) and the Tigray conflict (2020-2022), and compare health worker fatality rates with data from Syria (2016). This contextualizes our findings and strengthens the argument regarding the scale of destruction. See Sections 5.2, 5.4, and 6.

Suggestion: Complete missing citations and improve presentation. **Response:** All placeholder citations (?, ??) have been replaced with complete references. Statistics are now presented consistently (e.g., consistent decimal places). Repetitive phrasing has been reduced, and figures/tables have been reviewed for clarity.

Suggestion: Add data availability and reproducibility materials. **Response:** We have added a “Supplementary Materials” section at the end of the manuscript, listing a full data codebook, concordance matrix, list of primary source documents, and the qualitative coding scheme, available upon request. The Methodology section now details variable definitions and extraction rules (Section 4.3).

Response to Reviewer 2

We thank Reviewer 2 for their rigorous critique, which challenged us to significantly improve the scientific validity and objectivity of our study. We have undertaken the fundamental reframing and methodological strengthening suggested.

Major Concern: Critical lack of source criticism; reliance on a single, politicized source.

Response: This is the core concern we have addressed. We have integrated source criticism as a foundational

component of our methodology. We added a detailed analysis of UNRWA’s internal verification protocols and their vulnerabilities (Sections 1, 3). We explicitly frame our study as an analysis of the “operational reality and narrative construction of a humanitarian agency under fire” rather than an objective ground truth (Sections 1, 4.8). The new “Trustworthiness” subsection (4.5) details our triangulation process and the creation of a concordance matrix to map agreements and discrepancies with OCHA/WHO data.

Major Concern: Unsubstantiated causal claims and use of “systematic.” Response: We have revised our language throughout the manuscript. We now consistently use “systematic” in a descriptive, pattern-based sense (e.g., “widespread, frequent, and correlating events”) and explicitly state we are not making legal judgements of intent. We have replaced phrases like “systematic attacks” with “patterns of attacks” or “high frequency of incidents.” The correlation between damage and casualties is now explicitly framed as an association within the data, not proof of causality. See changes in the Abstract, Introduction (Section 1), Results (5.2, 5.6), and Discussion (6).

Major Concern: Absence of critical counter-evidence or adversarial perspective. Response: We acknowledge this as the study’s most significant limitation. We now explicitly state in the Limitations subsection (4.8) that “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.” We argue that our contribution is the rigorous analysis of one coherent, institutional dataset and its implications, while transparently acknowledging this inherent asymmetry. We have added a discussion on the need for future methodologies to integrate adversarial datasets (Sections 6, 7).

Suggestion: Reframe claims and incorporate IHL military perspective. Response: We have reframed our claims as described above. Regarding IHL, we have added nuance by discussing the principle of distinction and acknowledging that our single-source data “cannot definitively adjudicate the presence or absence of military objectives in each case” (Section 3). The Discussion (6) now more carefully frames findings as challenges to the *outcomes* of IHL principles (distinction, proportionality) rather than presumptive violations.

Suggestion: Deepen methodological critique and transparency. Response: The entire Methodology section (4) has been rewritten and expanded. It now includes: research design philosophy (interpretivist), detailed sampling and data collection protocols, explicit statistical procedures with significance testing, qualitative coding process with reliability metrics, and a robust “Trustworthiness” subsection detailing triangulation and negative case analysis. This provides the critical methodological transparency requested.

Minor Concern: Superficial theoretical framing and placeholder references. Response: As noted in response to Reviewer 1, we have operationalized the theoretical frameworks. All placeholder references have been completed and the bibliography updated.

Closing Note

We again extend our sincere gratitude to the reviewers for their time and exceptionally constructive critiques. Engaging with their points has compelled us to produce a far more rigorous, nuanced, and transparent manuscript. We believe the revisions have directly strengthened the paper’s methodological foundation, theoretical coherence, and scholarly contribution, and we hope it now meets the journal’s high standards for publication.