



# Compound Displacement and the Limits of the Protracted Refugee Framework: The Case of Palestinians in Gaza (2023-2025)

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**Abstract:** Armed hostilities in the Gaza Strip following 7 October 2023 produced a humanitarian and legal crisis without modern parallel. Within 365 square kilometres, approximately 1.9 million Palestinians — roughly 90 percent of the total population — were displaced at peak intensity, many repeatedly, across a shrinking and heavily militarized landscape from which external flight was structurally impossible. This paper introduces the concept of compound displacement to describe iterative, spatially constrained displacement that erases the conventional distinction between refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) and overwhelms the institutional architecture designed to manage both. Drawing on UNRWA situation reports, OCHA field data, human rights documentation, and relevant instruments of international humanitarian and refugee law, the paper argues that the Palestinian case in Gaza exposes fundamental structural inadequacies in the protracted refugee framework (PRF). Palestinians in Gaza constitute a uniquely hybrid category: registered refugees whose displacement traces to 1948, IDPs within a non-sovereign and besieged territory, and subjects of ongoing active displacement operations simultaneously. The PRF's core assumptions — stasis, externality, and eventual resolution through durable solutions — fail when applied to this context. The paper calls for a paradigmatic reconsideration of displacement law and proposes supplementary conceptual tools: layered refugeehood, coercive containment, and architectural displacement.

**Key Words:** compound displacement, protracted refugee situation, Gaza, UNRWA, Article 1D, internal displacement, forced migration, international humanitarian law, Palestinian refugees, layered refugeehood.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Displacement, as a legal and humanitarian category, has long been organized around a spatial grammar of departure and arrival. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees premises its protections on flight from a country of origin to a receiving state [1]. The UNHCR's concept of the protracted refugee situation (PRS) similarly assumes a territorial duality: a dangerous or inaccessible place of origin and a host territory, however inadequate, in which an uprooted population awaits durable solutions [2,3].

The Palestinian case in Gaza between October 2023 and the end of 2025 challenges every premise embedded in this spatial grammar. Gaza is bounded, enclosed, and approximately 365 square kilometres. Under a comprehensive Israeli-imposed blockade since 2007, Palestinians in Gaza cannot flee abroad in any meaningful sense: Egypt and Israel both declined to permit mass refugee outflows, and the Mediterranean offered only perilous escape. When the Israeli military campaign beginning on 7 October 2023 displaced approximately 1.9 million people, those people moved repeatedly



within a compressed perimeter, oscillating between evacuation orders, struck 'safe zones,' makeshift sites, and the ruins of former homes.

This paper argues that existing frameworks — the protracted refugee framework, the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and the UNRWA mandate — collectively fail to capture the structural character of what Palestinians in Gaza experienced. We propose compound displacement: a condition defined by iterative, spatially bounded, and coercively managed displacement that eliminates external flight, renders IDPs into de facto stateless refugees, and traps people in cycles of movement without arrival at any stable protective space. Compound displacement is not a more severe version of conventional displacement; it is a categorically different experience requiring new conceptual and legal tools.

### **1.1 Methodology, Data Sources, and Limitations**

This paper is a theoretically driven qualitative case study employing a single-case design. The Palestinian displacement crisis in Gaza between October 2023 and the end of 2025 is selected as an extreme case justified not by typicality but by diagnostic value: extreme cases reveal structural limits more vividly than ordinary ones. The aim is conceptual advancement rather than statistical generalizability.

The empirical account draws on four primary source categories: (1) UNRWA Situation Reports (Nos. 1-217, October 2023-November 2025) and the Annual Report of the Commissioner-General for 2024 (A/80/13) [4,11]; (2) OCHA's Hostilities in the Gaza Strip series (daily and weekly reports, 2024-2025) [5]; (3) documentation from Human Rights Watch, B'Tselem, BADIL, and the Gisha Legal Center [6,12,13,14]; and (4) legal and scholarly analysis drawing on Goodwin-Gill (2022), Turan (2024), and the Oxford Journal of Refugee Studies special issue on Gaza displacement (37(2), 2024) [7,8,9].

Three limitations are acknowledged. First, the paper relies on data produced under active armed conflict conditions, where independent verification was severely constrained; figures should be understood as best available estimates. Second, the paper includes no primary fieldwork or first-person testimony; its contribution is conceptual and legal rather than ethnographic. Third, the proposed categories require validation beyond the Gaza case; their scope conditions and boundary cases warrant further scholarly elaboration.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 The 1951 Convention and Article 1D**

The 1951 Refugee Convention occupies a paradoxical place in the history of Palestinian displacement [1]. Drafted in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 Nakba — during which an estimated 700,000 to 900,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled — the drafting states inserted Article 1D, which excludes from the Convention's scope any person currently receiving protection or assistance from UN organs other than UNHCR. This provision addressed the Palestinian case directly, given that UNRWA had been established in 1949 to serve Palestine refugees. Article 1D also provides that if such protection or assistance ceases for any reason, Palestinian refugees become ipso facto entitled to Convention benefits — the so-called inclusion clause.

The practical effect has been a bifurcated regime in which the vast majority of Palestinian refugees are managed through a sui generis institutional arrangement rather than the universal UNHCR system. UNRWA's working definition of 'Palestine refugee' covers persons whose normal residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948 who lost home and livelihood in the 1948 conflict, together with their registered descendants. Some 5.9 million Palestine refugees were registered with UNRWA in 2022, including some 1.5 million living in the Gaza Strip. These are a complex refugee population, whose displacement dates back to 1948, 1967 and subsequent wars.

As Goodwin-Gill [7] observes, the 1951 Convention's drafters did not foresee a protracted refugee situation; they anticipated that the Palestinian question would soon be resolved by the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP). The UNCCP was subsequently stripped of resources and political backing and largely ceased functioning, leaving Palestinian refugees without the durable solutions architecture that the 1951 framework had presupposed.

### **2.2 UNRWA: A Service Agency Without a Protection Mandate**

UNRWA was established by General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) in December 1949 with a mandate focused on relief and works programmes rather than legal protection [10]. UNRWA does not have the mandate to determine refugee



status, promote durable solutions or engage in formal international protection advocacy on behalf of individual refugees, unlike UNHCR. It is a service delivery agency operating in a legal vacuum created by the failure of the international community to resolve the underlying political conflict.

The UNRWA mandate has been renewed every three years for over seven decades — an institutional arrangement reflecting the consensus that Palestinian refugees constitute a collective political problem requiring a political solution, embodied in General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) of December 1948 [19]. This continuing renewal substitutes humanitarian management for political resolution. The events following October 2023 exposed the arrangement's fatal inadequacy. UNRWA schools became displacement shelters, then were themselves damaged or destroyed. Between October 2023 and the end of 2024, 263 UNRWA staff members were killed — unprecedented in the history of the United Nations [11]. The Israeli Knesset passed laws in October 2024 prohibiting UNRWA's operations in areas Israel defines as sovereign territory; by early 2025, international staff were denied visas and excluded from the territory they were mandated to serve.

### 3. OBJECTIVES

The paper pursues three principal objectives:

- (1) To document the structural character of Palestinian displacement in Gaza between October 2023 and November 2025 using authoritative humanitarian and legal data sources.
- (2) To introduce and theorize the concept of compound displacement as a distinct analytical category that transcends existing IDP/refugee typologies.
- (3) To demonstrate the structural inadequacies of the protracted refugee framework when applied to enclosed, coercively contained conflict zones, and to propose supplementary conceptual and legal tools: layered refugeehood, coercive containment, architectural displacement, and the obligation to non-containment.

### 4. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper employs a theoretically driven qualitative case study design, selecting the Gaza displacement crisis (2023-2025) as an extreme case with high diagnostic value for revealing structural limits of the protracted refugee framework. The methodology combines doctrinal legal analysis with empirical humanitarian data review and conceptual theory-building. The empirical account draws on four primary source categories: UNRWA Situation Reports (Nos. 1-217) [4]; OCHA field data [5]; documentation from Human Rights Watch, B'Tselem, BADIL, and the Gisha Legal Center [6,12,13,14]; and legal scholarly analysis [7,8,9]. Where sources diverge, conservative estimates are used. The paper employs a systematic approach to concept generation, situating new frameworks (compound displacement, layered refugeehood, coercive containment, architectural displacement) in relation to existing scholarship through critical engagement with prior literature [15,16,17,18].

### 5. DISCUSSION

#### 5.1 The Initial Phase: October 2023 – January 2025

The Israeli military campaign commencing on 7 October 2023 immediately generated mass displacement at a scale that overwhelmed existing humanitarian capacity. On 13 October 2023, the Israeli military issued evacuation orders directing approximately one million residents of northern Gaza southward via a route subsequently found unsafe by independent investigation. By October 2024, approximately 1.9 million Palestinians — 90 percent of Gaza's population — were internally displaced, according to UN estimates [5]. This figure obscures the iterative character of the displacement: many were displaced not once but repeatedly, as successive evacuation orders shrank available civilian space. Field research organizations documented many families displaced ten or more times. The Gisha Legal Center identified at least 105 discrete evacuation orders issued between 7 October 2023 and the January 2025 ceasefire [12], progressively reducing the 'humanitarian zone' in al-Mawasi from approximately 22 percent of the Gaza Strip to 17 percent by mid-2024.



The al-Mawasi 'humanitarian zone' illustrates the structural impossibility of meaningful protection in this context. Prior to October 2023, the coastal strip housed approximately 9,000 people and lacked electricity, sewage infrastructure, and adequate water supply. By mid-2024, it contained hundreds of thousands of displaced persons in makeshift shelters. B'Tselem's investigation documented at least 97 Israeli military strikes within the declared humanitarian zone between approximately May 2024 and January 2025, resulting in at least 550 deaths [13].

## **5.2 The Ceasefire Period and Second Displacement Wave: January–October 2025**

A ceasefire entered into force on 19 January 2025, producing immediate large-scale population movements as hundreds of thousands attempted to return northward. UNRWA reports documented approximately 309,699 displacement movements in the three days following ceasefire implementation [4]. However, returning populations found their homes destroyed or severely damaged; the UN Environment Program estimated that more than 62 percent of all buildings in Gaza had been damaged or destroyed during the first fifteen months of conflict. 'Return' thus did not restore pre-displacement conditions but constituted a further phase of displacement, now among ruins.

The ceasefire collapsed on 18 March 2025, triggering a second major phase of active displacement. UNRWA documented approximately 780,000 people displaced again following the breakdown, with over 82 percent of the Gaza Strip falling within militarized zones, displacement orders, or overlapping zones of both [4]. A second ceasefire entered force on 10 October 2025, again triggering population movements into a landscape of accumulated destruction, depleted resources, and institutional incapacity.

## **5.3 The Cumulative Humanitarian Toll**

Between 7 October 2023 and November 2025, Gaza's Ministry of Health, as reported by OCHA [5], recorded approximately 70,000 Palestinians killed and more than 170,000 injured. UNRWA data indicated that 2023 was the deadliest year on record for children in any conflict globally [11]. By mid-2025, only 17 of 36 hospitals were partially functional and only 61 of 160 primary health care facilities were operational. After the collapse of the March 2025 ceasefire, no humanitarian assistance entered Gaza directly via UNRWA for more than five months. Forty-seven percent of essential medical supplies were out of stock.

# **6. ANALYSIS**

## **6.1 Compound Displacement: Defining the Concept**

Existing displacement typologies organize forced movement along several axes: internal versus external; voluntary versus coerced; temporary versus protracted; and conflict-induced versus development- or climate-induced. These typologies share an underlying assumption of spatial separability — the possibility of distinguishing a zone of displacement from a zone of refuge. The Palestinian case in Gaza renders this assumption inoperable.

Compound displacement, as proposed here, denotes a condition defined by four structural features. First, iterativity: displacement is a repeated, cumulative series of forced movements, each occurring before the previous has been resolved. Second, spatial constriction: the territory within which displacement occurs is bounded and closed, preventing external flight and compressing populations into diminishing spaces. Third, coercive management: the displacement pattern is actively shaped by the military authority responsible for generating displacement, through evacuation orders, zone designations, and the differential application of violence to designated 'safe' and 'unsafe' areas. Fourth, institutional incapacity: existing humanitarian and legal frameworks are structurally unable to provide meaningful protection precisely because they presuppose conditions — external flight, host-country jurisdiction, stable zones of safety — that compound displacement systematically eliminates.

This definition builds upon but extends earlier scholarship. Fiddian-Qasmiyah's [15] work on 'multiple refugeehood' documents populations experiencing sequential displacement across multiple national contexts. Compound displacement's defining feature is spatial closure. The most similar to the present analysis is Masri's [16] idea of 'coerced migration', developed specifically in relation to Gaza. Compound displacement builds on Masri's framework while adding institutional incapacity and coercive management as constitutive elements rather than contextual conditions.

## **6.2 The Limits of the Protracted Refugee Framework**

The protracted refugee framework centres on three durable solutions: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and third-country resettlement [2]. Each presupposes conditions the Palestinian case in Gaza categorically does not satisfy.



Voluntary repatriation requires a country of origin to which return is possible and safe; for Palestinians under the UNRWA mandate, the 'country of origin' is Mandate Palestine, a political entity that no longer exists. The right of return affirmed in General Assembly Resolution 194 has not been implemented in over seven decades [19]. Local integration requires a host state willing and able to extend citizenship and social inclusion; Gaza is not a host state but an occupied territory lacking sovereignty. Third-country resettlement requires receiving states willing to admit Palestinian refugees at scale; no such commitment has been made.

The PRF also carries an implicit assumption of stasis — refugees in protracted situations await political resolution in a stable, if inadequate, humanitarian environment [3]. Gaza in 2023-2025 was the categorical inverse: not post-emergency stasis but an active, intensifying emergency — a condition of chronic acute crisis in which the displaced population was subject to ongoing military operations, iterative evacuation orders, and progressive destruction of humanitarian infrastructure. Furthermore, the PRF assumes humanitarian neutrality; in Gaza, UNRWA facilities and staff were targeted directly, and Knesset legislation represented an unprecedented assault on the institutional framework of Palestinian refugee protection [11].

**Table 1: How Compound Displacement Undermines Core Assumptions of the Protracted Refugee Framework**

PRF Assumption	What the PRF Presupposes	How Compound Displacement Subverts It (Gaza, 2023-2025)
<b>Externality</b>	Refugees cross an international border; a host state provides a minimal zone of safety.	All borders sealed. Egypt and Israel refused mass civilian exit. 1.9 million people trapped inside the conflict zone with no accessible external refuge.
<b>Stasis</b>	The emergency phase has ended; refugees wait in a stable, if inadequate, environment pending political resolution.	Chronic acute crisis: ongoing bombardment, 105+ evacuation orders, many families displaced ten or more times. Emergency and protractedness coincide.
<b>Durable Solutions</b>	Voluntary repatriation, local integration, or third-country resettlement are available in principle.	All three paths structurally closed: no recognized country of origin; no sovereign host state; no third-country admission commitments made.
<b>Humanitarian Neutrality</b>	Humanitarian institutions operate in spaces separated from active conflict and free from direct targeting.	263 UNRWA staff killed; UNRWA facilities repeatedly struck; Knesset legislation banned UNRWA operations; international staff denied visas.
<b>Singular Displacement Event</b>	A discrete moment of flight defines refugee legal status and protection needs.	Displacement is continuous and cumulative: registered 1948 refugees, re-displaced in successive conflicts, and again in 2023-2025 simultaneously, within one bounded territory.

### 6.3 Supplementary Frameworks

Layered refugeehood differs from 'multiple refugeehood' [15] in two respects. First, it encompasses displacement temporally layered across generations: the 2023-2025 displaced person in Gaza may simultaneously be a third-generation registered refugee from 1948, a secondary IDP from the 2008-2009 or 2014 Gaza conflicts, and an active victim of current forced displacement — all at once. Second, layered refugeehood captures the legal complexity of a person who simultaneously falls under the UNRWA mandate, would qualify under the 1951 Convention if UNRWA ceased to function (by virtue of Article 1D), and meets the definitional criteria for IDP status under the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

The obligation to non-containment complements the established principle of non-refoulement. International refugee law has historically centred on non-refoulement — the obligation not to return a refugee to a place where they face serious risk. The Palestinian case suggests a complementary principle: the obligation to non-containment, prohibiting states with control over border points from exercising that control in ways that trap endangered civilians in a zone of active armed conflict. The doctrinal basis can be found in Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and in the principle of protecting civilians from the foreseeable consequences of military operations.



Architectural displacement describes displacement produced not primarily through direct physical violence but through systematic destruction of the spatial conditions that make habitation possible: housing, infrastructure, water systems, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions. With more than 62 percent of Gaza's structures damaged or destroyed, the concept of 'return home' was rendered literally impossible for most displaced persons, regardless of political or military resolution.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The Palestinian case in Gaza between 2023 and 2025 constitutes a critical test of the international frameworks designed to protect displaced persons. It fails that test not primarily because of institutional failures of will or resources, though both were real, but because of structural inadequacies in the conceptual architecture of displacement law. The protracted refugee framework, the IDP regime, and the UNRWA mandate were each designed to manage specific, historically contingent configurations of displacement. None was designed for compound displacement: the iterative, spatially bounded, and coercively managed condition in which roughly 1.9 million people were trapped, in motion, in a devastated landscape from which external flight was structurally prevented.

The conceptual tools proposed here — compound displacement, layered refugeehood, coercive containment, architectural displacement, and the obligation to non-containment — have direct implications for how humanitarian actors document and respond to displacement crises, for how international lawyers assess state obligations in enclosed conflict zones, and for how policymakers design the next generation of international instruments governing forced migration. If the international community is serious about building a legal and humanitarian architecture adequate to the displacement crises of the twenty-first century, it cannot rely on instruments designed in response to mid-twentieth-century conditions that the current century has already rendered obsolete.

The Palestinian case is both a singular historical tragedy and a diagnostic window onto the structural inadequacies of the international protection regime. The response it calls for is not merely more resources or better coordination — though both are urgently needed — but a fundamental reconsideration of the conceptual foundations on which displacement law and practice rest.

## **8. LIMITATIONS**

Three limitations are acknowledged. First, the paper relies on data produced under active armed conflict conditions, where independent verification was severely constrained; all figures should be understood as best available estimates rather than definitive counts. Second, the paper includes no primary fieldwork or first-person testimony from displaced individuals; its contribution is conceptual and legal rather than ethnographic, and the voices of affected communities remain absent from this analysis — a gap that warrants remedy in subsequent research. Third, the proposed conceptual categories (compound displacement, layered refugeehood, coercive containment, architectural displacement) have been developed inductively from a single case and require validation across other enclosed conflict zones before their scope conditions and boundary cases can be established with confidence.

## **9. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the analysis presented, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. International legal bodies should develop supplementary instruments to the 1951 Refugee Convention that address compound displacement, establishing explicit protections for populations trapped in enclosed conflict zones where external flight is structurally prevented.
2. UNHCR and UNRWA should collaboratively develop operational frameworks for layered refugeehood recognition, enabling humanitarian documentation of cumulative displacement across generations without requiring displacement into a single administratively convenient legal category.
3. States with effective control over border crossings adjacent to active conflict zones should be subject to binding international scrutiny regarding their exercise of border controls where such controls foreseeably trap civilians in zones of ongoing armed conflict.



4. UNRWA's adaptive innovations during the 2023-2025 crisis — telemedicine, digital education platforms, and mobile health teams — warrant systematic study as potential models for humanitarian response in future situations of compound displacement.

5. Future research should engage directly with affected communities in Gaza and with legal practitioners and humanitarian organizations to translate the conceptual frameworks proposed here into specific legal instruments, humanitarian protocols, and policy recommendations.

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