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# The Gaza Hellscape: Ethnic Cleansing and Displacement in the Gaza Strip

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On the morning of 13 October 2023, Israel asked the United Nations to move approximately 1 million Palestinians from the northern to the southern Gaza Strip within twenty-four hours. At the same time, Israeli aircraft dropped leaflets on the northern Gaza Strip calling on Palestinians to leave and threatening death if they stayed. Meanwhile, the shelling continued. Israel has used a staggering amount of weaponry in its bombardment, including internationally banned weapons like white phosphorus,<sup>1</sup> which is classified as a war crime.

In its Western-backed war on Gaza, Israel is committing war crimes and crimes against humanity, which several international experts have described as tantamount to genocide. Israel is prosecuting its war in full view of the world on the pretext of “self-defence,” ignoring seventy-five years of settler colonialism, occupation, apartheid, and collective punishment against the Palestinian people as a whole and in particular against the population of Gaza.<sup>2</sup>

The UN and many Arab states have raised the alarm about plans to displace Palestinians both inside and outside the Gaza Strip into Egypt, and the issue has become a topic of serious discussion and repeated statements, especially from the Egyptian side. This paper surveys the humanitarian situation, shedding light on the context in which forced displacement is taking place within the strip and on the Arab and international reactions to it. It also looks at possible scenarios for the evolution of the displacement currently underway.

## I. General Overview of the Humanitarian Situation in Gaza

Home to 2.2 million people<sup>3</sup> living in a geographical area of no more than 365 km<sup>2</sup>, the Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated areas in the world (6,019 people/km<sup>2</sup>). It is currently witnessing an ongoing humanitarian disaster resulting from repeated Israeli attacks and Israel’s policy of slow death, carried out through the imposition of a sixteen-year blockade by air, sea, and land. During this time, Israel has waged five open wars against the Gaza Strip (2008–2009, 2012, 2014, 2018,

1 Human Rights Watch, “Israel: White Phosphorus Used in Gaza, Lebanon,” 12 October 2023, accessed 22 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3tFsczL>.

2 The world has ignored international attempts to lift the blockade and the war crimes committed against Palestinians in Gaza. From 2008 to 2018, thirty-five ships attempted to break the siege on the Gaza Strip. See: Freedom Flotilla Coalition, “35 Boats Challenge Israeli Naval Blockade of Gaza in Ten Years—2008 through 2018,” 3 June 2017, accessed 20 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/46xPGFv>. The most prominent of these was the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, hired by the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation. The Israeli army prevented the flotilla from reaching Gaza, killing ten activists. See: Al Jazeera, “Sufun Kasr Hisar Ghazza: Min al-Hurriya ila al-Zaytuna,” 22 September 2016, accessed 22 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/46NFLLO>.

There have also been three international investigations into war crimes in Gaza: 1. The Goldstone report, 2009, which addressed the siege and the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip in 2008–2009. The report confirmed that the Israeli bombardment of civilian population areas and UN centres was a violation of international humanitarian law and constituted a war crime. The UN Human Rights Council approved the report by a vote of 25 for, 6 against, and 11 abstentions. See: Rory McCarthy, “Israel Rejects UN Council Backing for Gaza War Crimes Report,” *The Guardian*, 16 October 2009, accessed 20 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3rVsceA>.

2. The Davis report: The UN Human Rights Council adopted the report of the fact-finding commission on the Israeli attack on Gaza in 2014. The report found that the Israeli aggression in the summer of 2014 was tantamount to war crimes. See: Al Jazeera, “Khulasat Taqir Dayfis bi-Sha’n al-‘Udwan ‘ala Ghazza,” 2 July 2015, accessed 22 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3PWObK6%D8%9B>.

3. The International Criminal court announced in 2021 that it was opening an investigation into possible war crimes in the Palestinian territories, including during Israel’s 2014 attack on the Gaza Strip. See: Peter Beaumont, “ICC Opens Investigation into War Crimes in Palestinian Territories,” *The Guardian*, 3 March 2021, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3QhaNX4>.

3 PCBS, “Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) Presents the Conditions of the Palestinian Population on the Occasion of the World Population Day, 11/07/2023,” 11 July 2023, accessed 22 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/475eJzL>.

2021), in which 5,365 people were killed, 62,953 were injured,<sup>4</sup> and thousands were displaced from their homes inside the Gaza Strip, while infrastructure and health care facilities were destroyed and houses demolished. In addition, Israel engaged in numerous attacks against demonstrators in the March of Return (2018–2019) and Palestinian fishermen and farmers. These policies have turned the Gaza Strip into the “the world’s largest open-air prison.”<sup>5</sup> Israel prohibits entry to and exit from Gaza and severely restricts the entry of goods, commodities, and basic construction materials such as steel and cement,<sup>6</sup> which has impeded reconstruction efforts.<sup>7</sup> In 2018, the UN declared that the Gaza Strip would be “unliveable” by 2020,<sup>8</sup> which three years later has come to pass. Israel treats Gaza as a “laboratory”<sup>9</sup> in which to test weapons and surveillance and control technologies – including the high-tech wall surrounding the strip<sup>10</sup> – which it then seeks to export to the world.

This violence has led to the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions in the Gaza Strip. Unemployment stands at about 50 per cent, while 83 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line.<sup>11</sup> According to the UN, 80 per cent of the population is dependent on humanitarian assistance.<sup>12</sup> Some 73 per cent of Gaza residents are food insecure as a result of the blockade and repeated wars. Israel strictly controls the entry of foodstuffs; it has even “made a calculation of the number of calories that a Palestinian can have in Gaza based on age, sex, and the basic types of food allowed into Gaza. This accordingly limits the number of food trucks allowed into the sector.”<sup>13</sup>

4 OCHA, “Data on Casualties,” accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/496Bghq>.

5 Norwegian Refugee Council, “Gaza: The World’s Largest Open-Air Prison,” 26 April 2018, accessed 22 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/407sDPu>.

6 Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, “Suffocation and Isolation: 15 Years of Israeli Blockade on Gaza,” 24 January 2021, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/46XBRQz>.

7 Following the Cairo conference for donor states, convened jointly by Egypt and Norway under the auspices of the UN and the EU, donor states pledged \$5.4 billion, half of it to reconstruction projects in Gaza, including the repair of electric grids, the construction of housing, and compensation for farmers. The other half was earmarked for the budget of the Palestinian government and for development in the West Bank. See: Khaled Mahmoud, “I’adat I’mar Qita’ Ghazza: al-Siyaqat wa-l-Tahaddiyat,” Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 12 November 2014, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3M45uYB>. Pursuant to an agreement between the Palestinian government, the Israeli government, and the UN, a Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism was created. In 2017, Oxfam announced that the mechanism was not meeting Palestinians’ vital needs due to Israel’s control over the humanitarian aid funds entering Gaza. Moreover, the mechanism limited the entry of construction materials and was subject to arduous bureaucratic hurdles. Ultimately, the mechanism served to institutionalise the siege and impeded reconstruction attempts. See: Oxfam, “Treading Water: The Worsening Water Crisis and the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism,” March 2017, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Fi3IPt>.

8 United Nations, “Gaza ‘Unliveable’, UN Special Rapporteur for the Situation of Human Rights in the OPT Tells Third Committee—Press Release (Excerpts),” 24 October 2018, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3QfyIG8>.

9 Antony Loewenstein, *The Palestine Laboratory* (London: Verso Books, 2023).

10 Israel’s wall around the Gaza Strip—measuring 65 km long, more than 6 m high, and extending deep underground as well—was completed in 2021 after three and a half years of work. This is in addition to a naval barrier, radar, cameras, and sensors trained on Gaza. See: Al Jazeera, “Israel Completes ‘Iron Wall’ Underground Gaza Barrier,” 7 December 2021, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Fh9eCf>.

11 UN News, “Kayf Yabdu al-Wad’ fi Ghazza fi Zill al-Azma al-Maliya al-Wujudiya al-Lati Tamurr bi-ha al-UNRWA?” 29 July 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3FzWK8Z>.

12 UN News, “Ghazza: Khamsat ‘Ashar ‘Aman min al-Hisar Dafa’at bi-80 bi-l-Mi’a min Sukkan al-Qita’ ila al-I’timad ‘ala al-Musa’adat al-Insaniya,” 21 June 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/497kyyc>.

13 Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, “Suffocation and Isolation.”

The ongoing war against the Gaza Strip that began on October 7 is the most violent yet in terms of the intensity and the magnitude of weaponry employed.<sup>14</sup> So far, 5,087 people have been killed, among them 2,055 children, and 15,273 injured. As of October 16, aerial bombardment had destroyed 8,840 housing units and rendered another 5,434 units uninhabitable. In addition, 167 educational facilities were bombed, including 20 schools run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), among them two schools that were used as shelters for internally displaced persons and 140 schools affiliated with the Palestinian Authority (PA).<sup>15</sup>

## II. Impact of the War in Gaza on Vital Sectors

### 1. Healthcare

The health sector in Gaza is in a state of total collapse due to the structural violence inherent in the siege policy and the successive wars waged by Israel. Collective punishment in the form of electricity and water cuts has exacerbated the situation, especially for intensive care units, premature infants, and dialysis treatment. Given the lack of medical equipment and supplies, the pressures on the sector are exceeding its capacity. The Gaza Strip has 35 hospitals with 3,026 beds; 6,053 doctors and 10,984 nurses<sup>16</sup>; and 89 operating rooms with 2,943 beds.<sup>17</sup> As of the beginning of 2021, the deficit in drug stocks stood at 47 per cent and in medical consumables at 33 per cent.<sup>18</sup>

Table 1: The health sector in the Gaza Strip

No. of hospitals	No. of beds	No. of doctors	No. of nurses	No. of operating rooms
35	3,026	6,053	10,984	89

Source: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), “On the Occasion of the World Health Day 7/4/2023,” 7 April 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/45y7zCX>

<sup>14</sup> Some sources estimate that the bombs dropped on Gaza in less than a week is the equivalent of all the US bombs dropped on Afghanistan in one year. See: Shira Rubin and Louisa Loveluck, “Israel Says It Will End Hamas Rule in Gaza as Casualties Soar,” *Washington Post*, 12 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/45XGMjL>.

<sup>15</sup> OCHA, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel–Flash Update #11,” 17 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, <https://shorturl.at/gvBGL>.

<sup>16</sup> PCBS, “On the Occasion of the World Health Day, 7/4/2023,” 7 April 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/45y7zCX>.

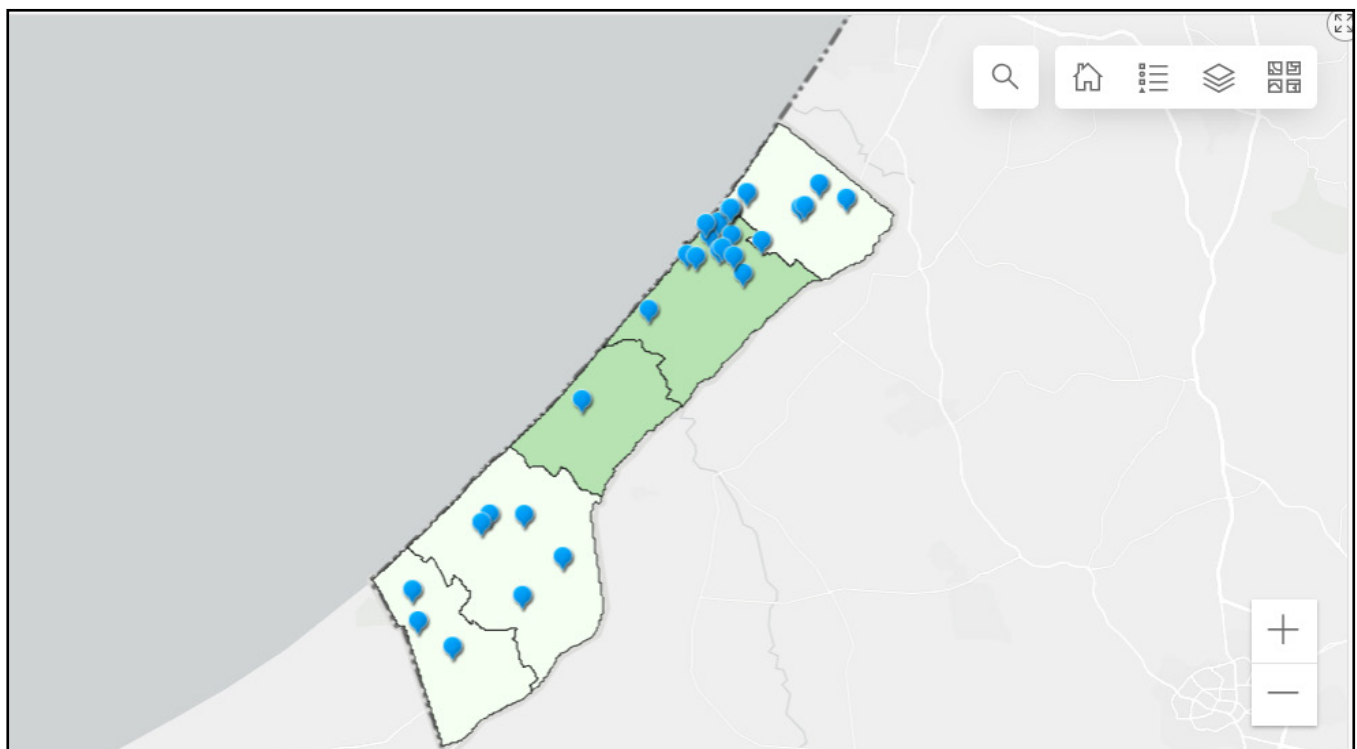
<sup>17</sup> Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, “Suffocation and Isolation.”

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Faced with ongoing, systematic killings during the current war against the population of the Gaza Strip and the ever-growing casualties, the health sector cannot cope. Evacuation orders were given to 23 hospitals (2,000 beds)<sup>19</sup> in Gaza and northern Gaza, and these orders are often followed by direct shelling. At the Baptist Hospital, for example, the bombing took the lives of 500 people, including the wounded, patients, doctors, paramedics, nurses, and displaced families seeking shelter in the hospital courtyard.<sup>20</sup>

Medical facilities and personnel were also directly targeted by occupation forces. The World Health Organisation (WHO) documented 115 attacks on health care in the period of 7–17 October 2023, which killed 15 health workers, injured 27, and damaged or destroyed 24 health facilities.<sup>21</sup> Four hospitals in north Gaza—Beit Hanoun Hospital, Sheikh Hamad Hospital for Rehabilitation and Prosthetics, Karama Specialist Hospital, and al-Durra Children’s Hospital—shut down entirely.<sup>22</sup>

Map 1: Distribution of hospitals in the Gaza Strip



Source: PCBS, “Tawzi’ al-Mustashfayat wa-l-Marakiz al-Ra’aya al-Sihhiya al-Awwaliya fi Filistin, 2019/2021,” accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/kr23z49z>

19 WHO, “Evacuation Orders by Israel to Hospitals in Northern Gaza Are a Death Sentence for the Sick and Injured,” 14 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/ijwQW>.

20 *Al-Araby al-Jadid*, “Mashhad Sadim: Mu’tamar Sahafi Wasat Jathamin Shuhada’ Mustashfa al-Mu’ammadani,” 18 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3MeJ3jf>.

21 UN News, “Munazzamat al-Sihha al-Alamiya Tudin al-Hujum ‘ala al-Mustashfa al-Mu’ammadani fi Ghazza,” 17 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/473uffd>.

22 OCHA, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel—Flash Update #11.”



## 2. Electricity and water

The policy of cutting off water and electricity to the Gaza Strip is not new. Israel has done the same thing in previous wars, and it is an instrument of the siege that amounts to a war crime.<sup>23</sup> Withholding water, electricity, and food is a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention and its additional protocols.<sup>24</sup> This collective punishment has been coupled with an Israeli discourse that dehumanises the Palestinians. When Israel announced on 9 October 2023 that it was cutting off essential supplies, Israeli Minister of Defence Yoav Gallant said, “I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel... We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly.”<sup>25</sup>

There are two sources of electricity in Gaza: the Israeli Electricity Company, which supplies electricity to the strip through ten cables, and the power plant inside Gaza City (see Map 2). Israel is nevertheless responsible for the production of electricity in Gaza: It controls the supply points from outside the strip and it exercises effective control over the sole power plant by preventing the entry of the fuel used to power it and directly targeting it during wars, thereby restricting Palestinians’ access to electricity.

The policy of collective punishment began in 2006<sup>26</sup> when Israel destroyed Gaza’s only power plant, shutting it down completely. Although it was partially repaired in 2009, this did not resolve the power crisis. In fact, blackouts increased in 2010, as the plant was operating with only one turbine.<sup>27</sup> The crisis came to the fore again in 2017 when the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah<sup>28</sup> decided not to pay Israel for the electricity it supplies to the Gaza Strip—which makes up 30 per cent of its needs—as a result of which the availability of electricity dropped to six hours a day.<sup>29</sup> In 2019 and 2020, Israel also barred the entry of fuel, disrupting the operation of the power plant inside Gaza, where electricity was available four to six hours a day.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Numerous international institutions have asserted this. See: Amnesty International, “Israel/OPT: Israel Must Lift Illegal and Inhuman Blockade on Gaza as Power Plant Runs out of Fuel,” 12 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://cutt.ly/AwTfOQPe>; UN News, “Mufawwad Huquq al-Insan Yahuthth ‘ala Naz’ Fatil al-Wad’ ‘al-Mutafajjir’ fi Isra’il wa-l-Ard al-Filistiniya al-Muhtalla,” 10 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3tV1zUJ>; Sari Bashi, “Nowhere to Go in Gaza,” Human Rights Watch, 13 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/46lciTM>.

<sup>24</sup> Article 14 of the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions states, “Starvation of civilians as a method of combat is prohibited. It is therefore prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or render useless, for that purpose, objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works.” See: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II),” 8 June 1977, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3SaQ9Jr>.

<sup>25</sup> Emanuel Fabian, “Defense minister announces ‘complete siege’ of Gaza: No power, food or fuel” *Times of Israel*, 9 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://cutt.ly/pwTfON0g>

<sup>26</sup> The policy was applied during Israel’s war on the Gaza Strip after the resistance abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. See: Human Rights Watch, “Gaza: Israeli Offensive Must Limit Harm to Civilians,” 29 June 2006, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2006/06/28/gaza-israeli-offensive-must-limit-harm-civilians>.

<sup>27</sup> Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, “Suffocation and Isolation.”

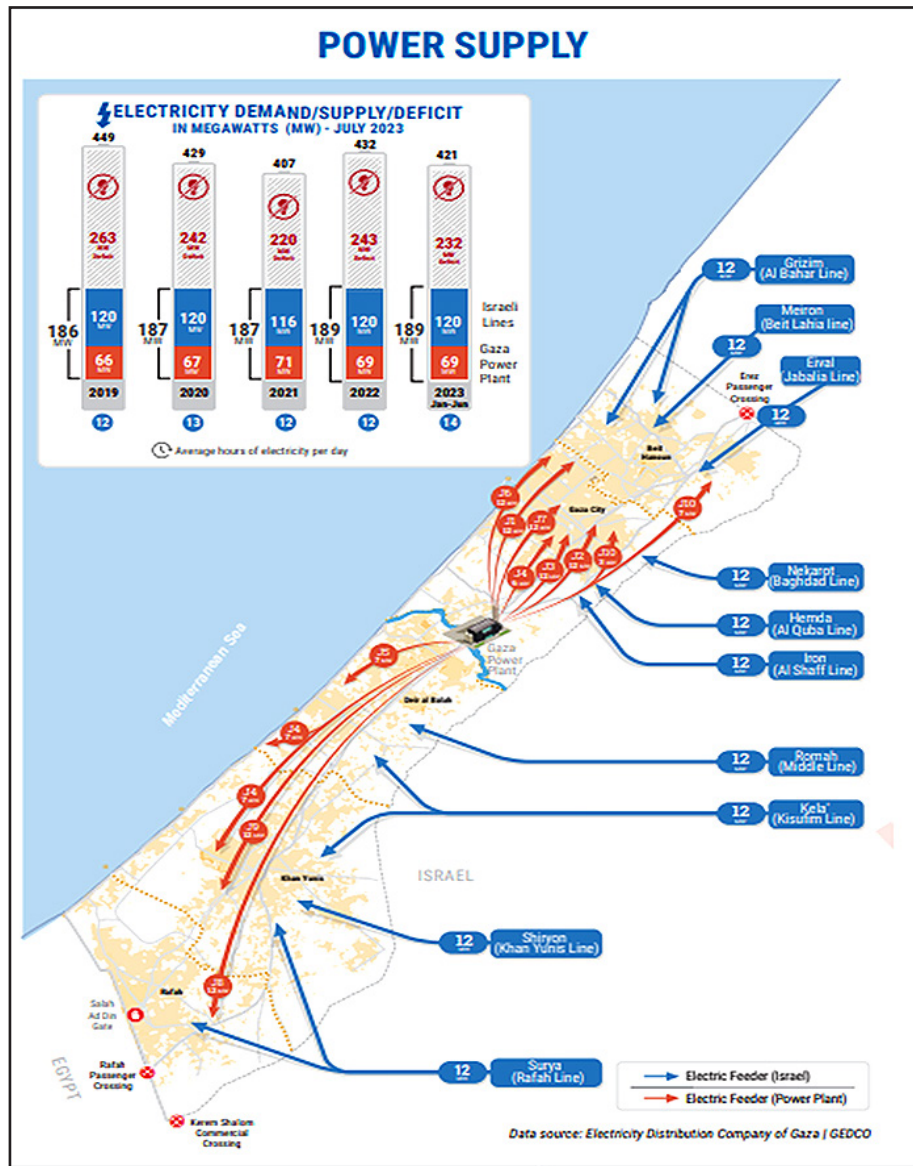
<sup>28</sup> Palestinian division is a chief reason for the deepening of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Amid the conflict over power and legitimacy, the PA in Ramallah decided in 2017 not to pay for electricity supplied to the strip, which was deducted from Palestinian tax revenues collected by Israel.

<sup>29</sup> Qatar intervened to resolve the electricity crisis in Gaza by providing a grant to purchase fuel to run Gaza’s only power plant, subsequently increasing the production of electricity from 25 to 80 megawatts, or enough for 16–18 hours a day in 2018, up from just five hours. See: OCHA, “Significant Boost in Electricity Supply across Gaza Improves the Delivery of Basic Services,” 14 December 2018, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/significant-boost-electricity-supply-across-gaza-improves-delivery-basic-services>.

<sup>30</sup> Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, “Suffocation and Isolation.”



Map 2: Electricity supply to the Gaza Strip, OCHA



The ongoing war makes this already critical situation even worse. The power and fuel cuts in vital facilities, especially in the health sector, puts the lives of thousands of people in hospitals at risk. Israel has cut electricity to the Gaza Strip, disabled the only power plant inside the strip, and prohibited the entry of fuel.<sup>31</sup> International institutions such as the WHO, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and others have said that fuel reserves in all Gaza hospitals are enough to cover an additional 24 hours only.

The interruption of electricity and fuel has exacerbated the water crisis as well, disrupting the operation of desalination<sup>32</sup> and sewage plants, which in turn leads to the increased contamination of seawater and

31 OCHA, "Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel—Flash Update #11."

32 "Per a 2016 report, nine in ten people in Gaza drink desalinated water produced by 154 public and private desalination plants, only 48 of which are licensed and monitored...In addition, the small desalination plants are currently functioning at 15 percent of their capacity due to insufficient power supply." See: Shira Efron et al., "The Public Health Impacts of Gaza's Water Crisis," RAND, 26 September 2018, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3sc4t9Q>.

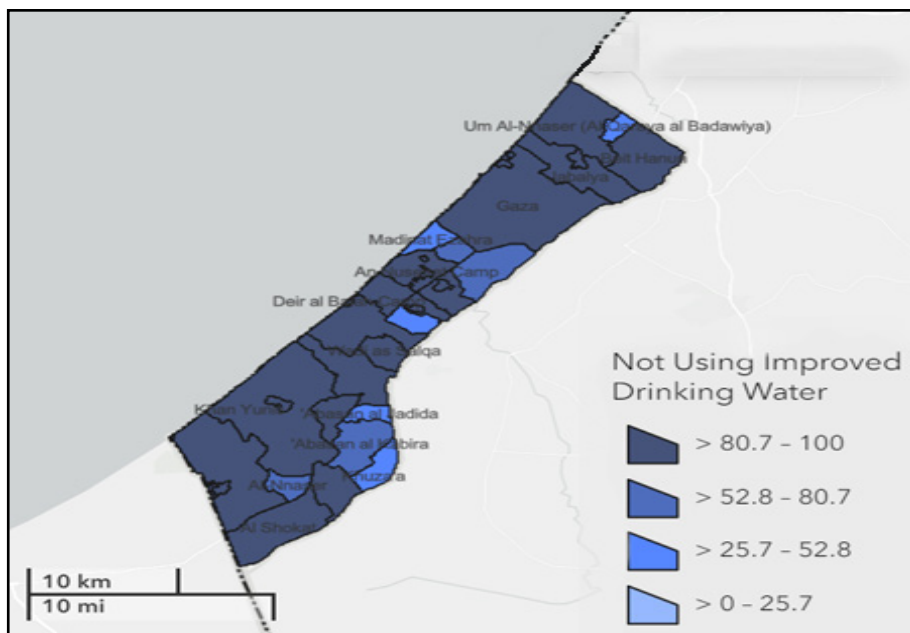
the water basin that supplies Gaza.<sup>33</sup> There are two chief sources of water in Gaza: coastal groundwater and Mekorot, the Israeli water company, which supplies an estimated 6.4 million m<sup>3</sup>.<sup>34</sup>

Sources indicate that “more than 97% of the water pumped annually from the coastal basin does not comply with WHO standards.”<sup>35</sup> Water contamination is responsible for one-quarter of illnesses in Gaza.<sup>36</sup>

Per capita water consumption in the Gaza Strip stood at 82.7 litres at the beginning of 2023, of which only 21.3 litres are fit for human use.<sup>37</sup> During the ongoing war, this has fallen to less than 1 litre per day and from polluted sources.<sup>38</sup> Attempting to draw the world’s attention to the severity of the tragedy; UNRWA said, “People will start dying without water.”<sup>39</sup>

As of October 12, Israel had destroyed “six water wells, three water pumping stations, one water reservoir, and one desalination plant serving over 1,100,000 people.”<sup>40</sup>

Map 3: Distribution of contaminated water in the Gaza Strip



Source: PCBS, “Households that Don’t Use Improved Drinking Water Sources, 2021,” accessed 23 October 2023, at: [Improved Drinking Water | INTERACTIVE MAPS \(arcgis.com\)](https://bit.ly/3Fulo9A)

33 Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, “Suffocation and Isolation.”

34 PCBS, “Kammiyat al-Miyah al-Muzawwada li-l-Qita’ al-Manzili wa-l-Mustahlaka wa-Kammiyat al-Faqid wa-’Adad al-Sukkan wa-Hissat al-Fard al-Yawmiya fi Qita’ Ghazza Hasab al-Muhafaza, 2021,” accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/40nh7Ql>.

35 Ibid.

36 OCHA, “Seawater Pollution Raises Concerns of Waterborne Diseases and Environmental Hazards in the Gaza Strip,” 9 August 2018, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/seawater-pollution-raises-concerns-waterborne-diseases-and-environmental-hazards-gaza-strip>.

37 PCBS, “The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) and the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) Issue a Joint Press Release on the Occasion of World Water Day,” 22 March 2022, accessed 3 November 2023, at: <https://pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=4197>.

38 UNRWA, “UNRWA Situation Report #7 on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank,” 17 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Fulo9A>.

39 Ibid.

40 OCHA, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel—Flash Update #11.”

### III. Context for the ongoing displacement

Ethnic cleansing in Palestine, ongoing since the Nakba, is a main pillar of the Zionist project, affirmed in the statements of the Israelis in every war they fight against the Palestinians. Recently Israeli President Isaac Herzog stated, “It is an entire nation out there that is responsible. It’s not true this rhetoric about civilians [being] not aware.”<sup>41</sup> As the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), Ghassan Alian, said in a speech in Arabic addressed to the residents of the Gaza Strip: “ Hamas has turned into ISIS, and the residents of Gaza, instead of being appalled, are celebrating. Human animals must be treated as such. There will be no electricity and no water, there will only be destruction. You wanted hell, you will get hell.”<sup>42</sup> Some Israeli officials have explicitly called for a second Nakba.<sup>43</sup> The brutal shelling of civilians is making this a reality. According to the UN special rapporteur for the human rights situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, “There is a grave danger that what we are witnessing may be a repeat of the 1948 Nakba, and the 1967 Naksa, yet on a larger scale [...] Israel has already carried out mass ethnic cleansing of Palestinians under the fog of war. Again, in the name of self-defence, Israel is seeking to justify what would amount to ethnic cleansing.”<sup>44</sup>

Today, there are some 5.9 million Palestinian refugees in the diaspora,<sup>45</sup> in addition to 742,000 internal refugees in the West Bank and Gaza Strip,<sup>46</sup> displaced by the policies of occupation and apartheid. There are 1.7 million refugees in Gaza,<sup>47</sup> and about 3,000 people are still displaced due to previous wars.<sup>48</sup>

The threat of displacement coincided with news of an imminent ground invasion of the Gaza Strip. On 13 October, Israel sent a letter to UN representatives in the Gaza Strip calling for the evacuation of the area north of Wadi Gaza within twenty-four hours and telling 1 million Palestinians to head south.<sup>49</sup> Leaflets dropped by Israeli aircraft on northern Gaza repeated the instruction and threatened to kill those who disregarded it; Israeli army spokesman Daniel Hagari issued a similar demand.<sup>50</sup>

With this war, Israel seeks to change the demography and physical reality of the Gaza Strip by concentrating the population in the south and emptying the north in advance of a ground invasion. It is also increasing the pressure on the population by concentrating them in densely populated, underserved

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41 Al Jazeera, “al-Ra’is al-Isra’ili: Laysa Sahihan al-Qawl Inna al-Madaniyin fi Ghazza Ghayr Dali’in fi al-Amr,” 14 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3tKfpaJ>.

42 Gianluca Pacchiani, “COGAT chief addresses Gazans: ‘You wanted hell, you will get hell’” *Times of Israel*, 10 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/tDEUX>

43 Ariel Kallner, an MK for Likud, called for a second Nakba for Palestinians in Gaza and anyone who dared to join the war against Israel. He wrote on his account on X: “Nakba to the enemy now! [...] Right now, one goal: Nakba! A Nakba that will overshadow the Nakba of 48. Nakba in Gaza and Nakba to anyone who dares to join!” 8 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/497jp52>.

44 OHCHR, “UN Expert Warns of New Instance of Mass Ethnic Cleansing of Palestinians, Calls for Immediate Ceasefire,” 14 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3QtbtIS>.

45 UN News, “Kayf Yabdu al-Wad’ fi Ghazza.”

46 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, “Palestine, State of,” 19 May 2022, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Q6DZPg>.

47 UNRWA, “Gaza Strip,” August 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3S5mxx6>.

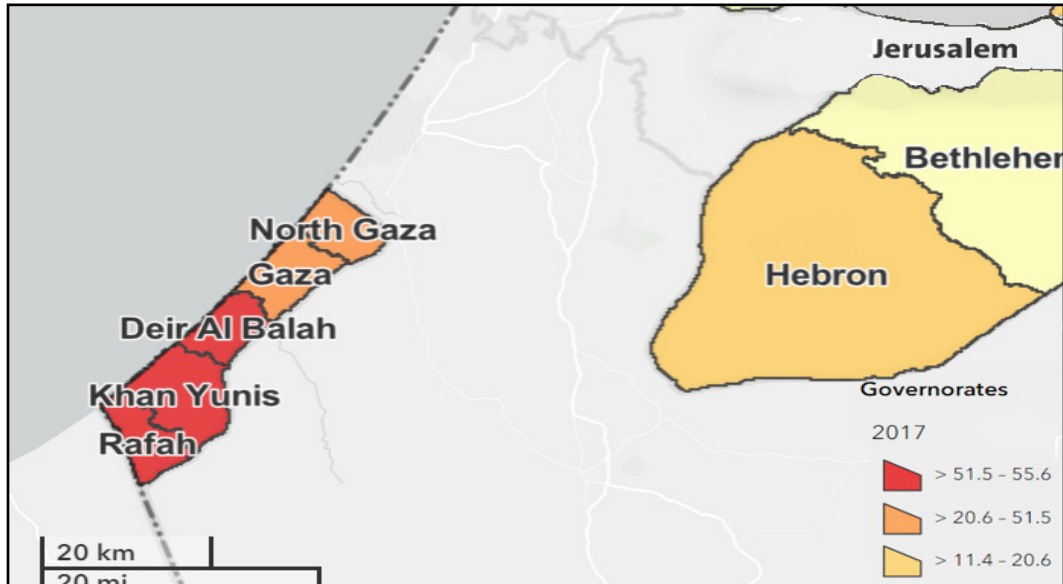
48 WHO, “Public Health Situation Analysis (PHSA) on Hostilities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt), 14 October 2023,” 14 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/491TEYH>.

49 Barak Ravid, “Israel to UN: Northern Gaza Strip Must Be Evacuated within 24 Hours” [Hebrew], Walla, 13 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3LZyuk0>.

50 Yoav Ziton, “IDF Spokesman in Interview with Al Jazeera: I Call on the Residents of Gaza City to Evacuate the Area” [Hebrew], 13 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3tC6lJx>.

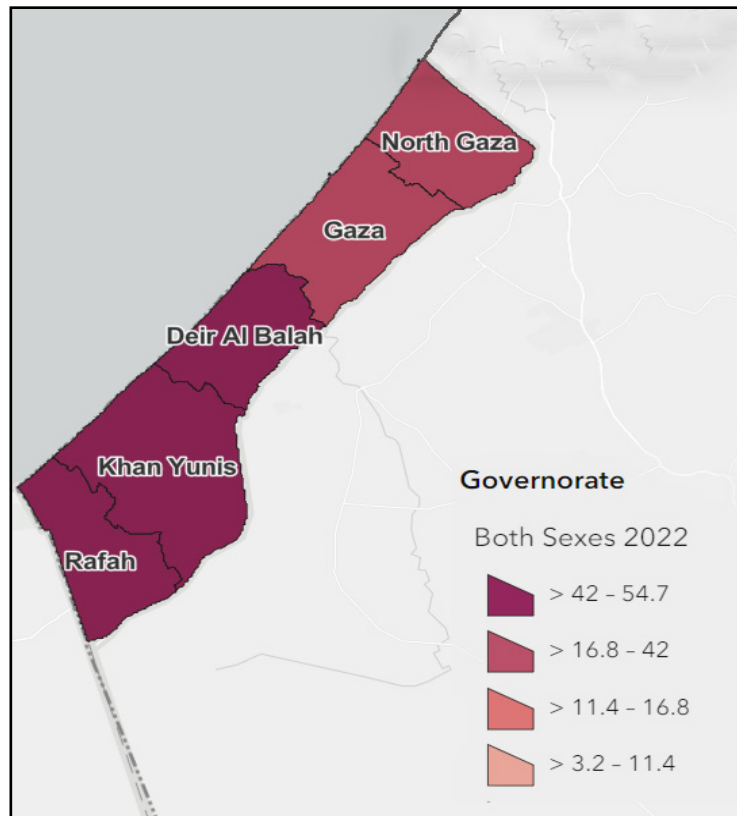
areas, so that they are forced to leave Gaza and seek refuge in Sinai. Areas south of Wadi Gaza (Deir al-Balah, Khan Yunis, Rafah) suffer from high poverty (see Map 4) and high unemployment (see Map 5).

Map 4: Poverty among individuals in the Gaza Strip



Source: PCBS, "Poverty Percentages among Individuals in Palestine, 2017," accessed 23, October 2023, at: Poverty Percentages | INTERACTIVE MAPS (arcgis.com)

Map 5: Unemployment among individuals in the Gaza Strip



Source: PCBS, "Unemployment Rate among Labour Force Participants in Palestine, 2015–2022," accessed 23 October, at: Unemployment Rate among Labour Force Participants | INTERACTIVE MAPS (arcgis.com)

According to UNRWA, more than 1 million people—almost half of Gaza’s total population—had been displaced as of 16 October 2023. Some 600,000 people were displaced to the central region, Khan Younis, and Rafah, of whom approximately 400,000 are in UNRWA facilities.<sup>51</sup> An unknown number of displaced people were sheltering in UNRWA schools in Gaza and in the north. UNRWA staff evacuated these schools following Israeli directives,<sup>52</sup> leaving residents of the northern Gaza Strip unprotected and without humanitarian assistance.

**Table 2: Geographic distribution of displaced persons**

Area	Number
Central Gaza, Khan Younis, and Rafah	600,000
	400,000 people (66.67%) sheltering in UNRWA facilities
Gaza City and the north*	400,000
Total	1,000,000

\*This is an estimated figure and likely to increase.

Source: UNRWA, “Situation Report #5 on the Gaza Strip & West Bank,” 16 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3SbA71Z>

**Table 3: Distribution of displaced persons as of 13 October 2023**

UNRWA facilities	PA schools	Relatives and other facilities	Total
271,083	26,984	153,004	423,378

Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “Public Health Situation Analysis (PHSA) on Hostilities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt), 14 October 2023,” accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3btm4dv4>

<sup>51</sup> UNRWA, “Situation Report #6 on the Gaza Strip & the West Bank,” 16 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3SbA71Z>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

The question is, in light of the targeting of infrastructure and the continuous shelling of civilians, under what conditions do displaced people move within the Gaza Strip? What guarantees do they have to access food, water, and shelter?

## 1. Lack of safe passage<sup>53</sup>

The Israeli military threat to displace more than 1 million civilians in the northern Gaza Strip to the south within 24 hours is a war crime—namely, forcible transfer—as the order was contrary to the desire of the population and entailed no any guarantees for the safety of the displaced and their property or for their return.<sup>54</sup>

As a result of constant threats and shelling, many people, including families, were forced to flee to the south to seek safety, hundreds of them on foot.<sup>55</sup> The Israeli army designated two roads out of the city for the residents of the northern Gaza Strip and Gaza City—Salah al-Din and Rashid streets—but no safety guarantee was given to people using these roads. Occupation forces massacred three convoys of people leaving pursuant to the evacuation order in different locations on these two streets, killing 70 people, most of them children and women, and wounding more than 200.<sup>56</sup>

## 2. Lack of a safe refuge and protection

There is no safe place in the Gaza Strip. As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated at the beginning of the war, “I say to the residents of Gaza: Leave now because we will operate forcefully everywhere.”<sup>57</sup> Israel has bombed the southern Gaza Strip as well, including residential areas, hospitals, schools, churches, and mosques. There are no safe shelters; displaced people are taking shelter in UNRWA schools, PA schools, relatives’ homes, and hospitals. All of these places have come under Israeli fire, including UNRWA facilities, which are the main shelter for the displaced. Thirty-

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<sup>53</sup> Humanitarian or safe corridors are defined as “agreements between parties to the armed conflict to allow for safe passage for a limited time in a specific geographic area. They can allow civilians to leave, humanitarian assistance to come in or allow for the evacuation of the wounded, sick or dead...Safe passages are not expressly defined in IHL [international humanitarian law], which instead would be clear that civilians are protected, notably from the effects of hostilities, wherever they are and that impartial humanitarian organizations such as the ICRC are entitled to provide humanitarian assistance to people in need. This means that even if there is a safe passage operation out of an area of intense fighting, any civilians who cannot or do not wish to leave the area are still protected under IHL and can benefit from humanitarian assistance.” See: OCHA, “How Humanitarian Corridors Work to Help People in Conflict Zones,” 3 June 2022, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ScHE0E>.

<sup>54</sup> “Under the IHL, parties to an armed conflict may not deport or forcibly transfer the civilian population, in whole or in part, unless the security of the civilians involved, or imperative military reasons so demanded. Apart from these narrow exceptions, the transfer and evacuation of people at risk must be voluntary and carried out with their consent. The transfer and evacuation of people at risk should only take place if certain conditions are fulfilled: the consent of the people concerned must be acquired and it must be voluntary, the family unity must be preserved, all necessary authorisations and guarantees must be provided by the relevant parties regarding, inter alia, property, destination, security issues and subsequent return.” Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> OCHA, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel, Flash Update #7,” 13 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/45ycV15>.

<sup>56</sup> Al-Araby al-Jadid, “al-Ihtilal Yastahdif al-Nazihin fi Ghazza, Harabu min al-Qasf Shamalan fa-Laquh Januban,” 15 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, <https://bit.ly/3s1Ptvd>.

<sup>57</sup> ILH Staff, “‘Leave now’: Netanyahu’s warning to Gazans”, *Israel Hayom*, 8 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/ps047>.

three UNRWA facilities have been damaged,<sup>58</sup> which limits their ability to protect civilians and provide them with assistance. According to a recent bulletin, “The 4,000 IDPs who were sheltering at the UNRWA school in Maghazi which was directly hit on 17 October were evacuated to other nearby schools, resulting in those shelters becoming more overcrowded.”<sup>59</sup>

Map 6: Distribution of displaced people sheltering in UNRWA facilities by governorate



Source: UNRWA, “UNRWA Situation Report #8 on the Situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (Including East Jerusalem),” 18 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Fy9c8Q>

<sup>58</sup> UNRWA, “Situation Report #9 on The Gaza Strip and The West Bank (Including East Jerusalem),” 20 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3tPr4tf>.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Attempts are underway to redraw the borders of the Gaza Strip by pushing most of the population towards the south. In addition, some services and assistance are being provided to the south while excluding the north, in order to create a more attractive environment and thus draw people to it. Israel announced what it called “the humanitarian assistance zone” in al-Mawasi, west of Khan Yunis, and occupation army spokesman Avichay Adraee urged the population to head to this area, announcing on the X platform, that “international humanitarian aid will be directed to [this area] in case of necessity.”<sup>60</sup>

However, it does not yet appear that these plans will succeed due to the weakness of health and vital facilities in the southern governorates, the high rate of poverty and unemployment, and the pressure on vital facilities. UNRWA has indicated that many displaced families are returning to Gaza City and northern Gaza due to continued air strikes. Meanwhile, living conditions in the south are becoming even more difficult in light of the overcrowding of temporary shelters, the disruption to water and electricity supplies, and the lack of sanitation.<sup>61</sup>

### 3. International and Arab positions on forced displacement

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on Israel to “to avert a humanitarian catastrophe” in the Gaza Strip.<sup>62</sup> Speaking on behalf of the Arab League, Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit condemned the attempts at displacement, noting that it constitutes a war crime. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation expressed its “absolute rejection of the targeting of civilians under any pretext, their displacement from their homes, their starvation and the denial of water, and the denial of safe access to humanitarian assistance, in contravention of all international norms and laws and of the most basic humanitarian principles and values.”<sup>63</sup> The Saudi Foreign Ministry also expressed “its categorical rejection of calls for the forced displacement of the Palestinian people from Gaza and its condemnation of the continued targeting of unarmed civilians there.”<sup>64</sup> Kuwait rejected targeting civilians under any pretext, displacing them from their homes, and depriving them of humanitarian assistance.<sup>65</sup> Qatar expressed its “categorical rejection of the attempts to forcibly displace the brotherly

<sup>60</sup> Avichay Adraee, “IDF orders Gaza residents to move to humanitarian zone in al-Mawasi, where humanitarian aid will be directed if necessary,” X, 18 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ScHVkc>.

<sup>61</sup> OCHA, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel–Flash Update #11.” “One line of water was opened today for three hours only in the South of the Gaza Strip, feeding limited water to only half of the population of Khan Yunis (nearly 100,000 people). This does not solve the urgent water need in other parts of Khan Yunis, the Middle Area and Rafah. Only 14 per cent of the population in the Strip benefited from this three-hour opening of the water line.” See: UNRWA, “UNRWA Situation Report #7 on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.”

<sup>62</sup> UN News, “Gaza: Nowhere to Go, as Humanitarian Crisis Reaches ‘Dangerous New Low,’” 13 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mnfdcps9>.

<sup>63</sup> OIC, “OIC Affirms its Absolute Rejection of Calls for the Forced Displacement of the Palestinian People from Gaza and Strongly Condemns the Continued Israeli Military Aggression,” 13 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://shorturl.at/aszRS>.

<sup>64</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saudi Arabia, “al-Mamlaka Tu’akkid Rafdaha al-Qati’ li-Da’wat al-Tahjir al-Qasri li-l-Sha’b al-Filistini min Ghazza wa-Tudin Istimrar Istihdaf al-Madaniyin al-‘Uzli,” 13 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: [bit.ly/3s3FzCA](https://bit.ly/3s3FzCA).

<sup>65</sup> Kuwaiti News Agency, “Wazir al-Kharijiya Yulqi Kalimat Dawlat al-Kuwayt bi-l-Ijtima’ al-Istithna’i li-Wuzara’ Kharijiya (al-Ta’awun al-Islami) bi-Jadda,” 18 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3tH4h2W>.



Palestinian people from Gaza Strip, and calls for lifting the blockade on the Strip and providing full protection to civilians under international law and international humanitarian law.”<sup>66</sup> Iraq’s foreign minister rejected the idea of forcibly transferring Palestinians to Sinai,<sup>67</sup> while King Abdullah II stressed that “Jordan will protect its borders and support the steadfastness of the Palestinian people on its land with all its capabilities, and we will not permit new waves of refugees.”<sup>68</sup>

The most prominent position was that of the Egyptian regime. President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and many other political figures stressed that Egypt would not allow Palestinians to be expelled from Gaza to Sinai. The Egyptian National Security Council also confirmed that Egypt “will not allow its national security to be compromised.”<sup>69</sup> While El-Sisi did not oppose the displacement of Palestinians in principle, he said, “If there is an idea for transfer, there is the Negev desert in Israel. The Palestinians can be transferred there until Israel completes its declared mission of liquidating the resistance or armed groups in the Strip, such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas, and then return them if it wishes.”<sup>70</sup>

At the same time, the Egyptian regime confirmed its willingness to provide humanitarian assistance to the Gaza Strip, despite closing the Rafah crossing with concrete walls and international and regional demands to open it.<sup>71</sup> Egypt made the exit of foreigners in the besieged Gaza Strip through the Rafah crossing conditional on the entry of relief aid to Gaza.<sup>72</sup>

Responding to criticisms for closing the Rafah crossing and barring the entry of aid, Egypt argued that it did not close the crossing with Gaza; rather, the Israeli shelling of the Palestinian side of the crossing disrupted operations. Moreover, it is Israel that refuses to allow aid into the Gaza Strip, and it had not yet given Egypt the green light to open the crossing, thus prolonging the disaster in Gaza.

## IV. Possible Scenarios

In light of the conditions in the Gaza Strip, which portend a genuine disaster, and in the absence of international and regional intervention to stop the war and provide humanitarian assistance, we are

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<sup>66</sup> Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Qatar Announces Its Categorical Rejection of the Attempts to Forcibly Displace the Palestinian People from Gaza Strip,” 14 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/statements/qatar-announces-its-categorical-rejection-of-the-attempts-to-forcibly-displace-the-palestinian-people-from-gaza-strip>.

<sup>67</sup> Al Jazeera, “Wazir Kharijiyat al-Iraq: Narfud Tahjir al-Ghazzawiyin wa-l-Mintaq Kulluh Tawajjih Khatar al-Harb,” 20 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/494XbFt>.

<sup>68</sup> CNN Arabic, “Fi Ijtima’ bi-Qiyadat al-Jaysh, al-Malak ‘Abdullah: al-Urdun sa-Yahmi Hududah wa-Yarfud Ayy Sinariyu li-Tahjir al-Filistiniyin,” 17 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/497t5kl>.

<sup>69</sup> Al Jazeera, “Misr Tarfud Siyasat al-Tahjir wa-Muhawalat Tasfiyat al-Qadiya al-Filistiniya,” 15 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3s1Pyiv>.

<sup>70</sup> CNN Arabic, “al-Sisi Yuhadhdir min Khuturat Luju’ Sukkan Ghazza ila Misr: Idha Kan Hunak Fikrat Tahjir ‘fa-Sahra’ al-Naqab Mawjuda,” 18 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3FratyE>.

<sup>71</sup> Al-Araby al-Jadid, “al-Jaysh al-Misri Yughliq Ma’bar Rafah ma’ Ghazza Niha’iyan bi-Tarkib Jidar Ismanti,” 14 October 2023, accessed 23 October 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/4062YXo>.

<sup>72</sup> Al Jazeera, “Misr Tarfud Siyasat al-Tahjir.”

facing difficult scenarios. The first and most likely scenario is that the Palestinians remain steadfast in the face of the brutality of the Israeli occupation and do not flock to the Egyptian border in large numbers, for the following reasons.

1. The Nakba and the experience of being refugees are still a living part of the consciousness of the Palestinian people, specifically in the Gaza Strip, 77 per cent of whose residents are refugees. They are determined not to repeat this experience, even the third and fourth generations who did not live through the Nakba but felt its aftermath. On the contrary, there is a resolve to win the right to return to the cities and villages from which they were expelled, as demonstrated most clearly by the return marches of 2018 and 2019.
2. In the absence of a clear idea of what may come next, there is a psychological factor at work related to the refugee experience itself, the plight of refugees, and the reality of being torn from one's environment.
3. There is a political dimension as well that goes to the heart of the Palestinian cause: a refusal to provide any chance for a resolution outside the national consensus and an adherence to the legal right to return and compensation set forth in UN Resolution 194.
4. UNRWA's financial crises and service reductions indicate that this crisis may exacerbate if refugee displacement reoccurs, particularly in the context of ongoing efforts to eliminate the question of refugees.
5. There are no guarantees that refugees would be able to return to Gaza at the war's end. If the reality on the ground is that there is a population outside the Gaza Strip, Israel will not take responsibility and will not permit them to return. This is the plan it aspires to. Already there are some 6 million refugees who have been waiting to realise the right of return for more than seventy-five years.

The second scenario is the exit of hundreds of people from the Gaza Strip for humanitarian reasons, but not such a large influx over the Egyptian border that would constitute a new wave of refugees. However, given the magnitude of the shelling we are seeing, which could intensify, and an Israeli ideology that aims to redraw the borders of the Gaza Strip and give Palestinians the option of death or displacement, the temporary displacement of Palestinians in Sinai, undertaken with the intention of return, is not out of the question. Therefore, it is not enough for Arab positions to call on Palestinians to be steadfast and demand that Israel stop displacing them; proactive measures must be taken to end the war and protect the Palestinians. Such a scenario would only come to pass as the result of continuous massacres of Palestinians. The sole guarantee against forced displacement and the influx of refugees is therefore to stop the war, destruction, and the policy of collective punishment. This is not in the interest of the Palestinians alone, but of Arab states. Forced displacement would mean displacing the problem and the responsibility from the occupier to the host countries. In the event that the worst happens and this scenario materialises, there must be international and regional assurances that anyone outside the Gaza Strip will be allowed to return and there must be guarantees for their right of return.