

Israeli Forced Displacement Engineering and Palestinian Sumūd in Gaza

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Abstract

The ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza has resulted in the widespread killing of innocent civilians, along with the destruction of homes, universities, and critical infrastructure—deepening a humanitarian catastrophe that reflects a broader settler colonial agenda. This study investigates the deliberate strategies of forced displacement engineered by Israel in Gaza, and the corresponding practices of Palestinian sumūd (steadfastness) as forms of resistance. Situated within Settler Colonial Theory by (Patrick Wolfe, 1999), the research critically examines how Israeli military, legal, political, and media tactics function as mechanisms of population transfer and ethnic cleansing aimed at permanent demographic transformation. Drawing on thematic analysis of official Israeli government and military statements, reports from international organizations and media related to Forced Displacement, alongside thirty semi-structured interviews with Palestinians from diverse backgrounds, the study reveals the systematic nature of displacement and the resilience it engenders. Findings demonstrate that forced displacement in Gaza is not merely a wartime consequence but a central strategy of settler-colonial domination, with repeated displacements fracturing Palestinian social fabric and exhausting resistance. Palestinians' refusal to comply with Israeli evacuation orders and their persistent rebuilding efforts embody sumūd, a powerful grassroots counter-strategy that transforms survival into political resistance. This steadfastness challenges settler-colonial attempts at erasure and asserts an enduring claim to land, identity, and futurity. The study underscores that while sumūd represents essential resilience, it must be supported by international legal accountability and global solidarity to effectively counter the machinery of ethnic cleansing. This research contributes critical insights to settler colonial studies, human rights discourse, and Palestinian resistance narratives, illuminating the urgent need for integrated approaches to halt ongoing displacement and uphold Palestinian

rights.

Keywords

Ethnic Cleansing, Settler Colonialism, Steadfastness, Genocide, Forced Displacement

1. Introduction

The Gaza Strip stands today as one of the most densely populated and relentlessly besieged places on Earth. Encompassing just 365 square kilometers, it is home to over two million Palestinians—most of whom are descendants of refugees forcibly expelled during the 1948 Nakba (Hilal, 2015). For decades, Gaza has been subjected to Israel’s military occupation, economic blockade, and recurrent large-scale assaults, with conditions deteriorating to levels widely recognized as constituting collective punishment (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

These policies are not random, nor are they merely reactive responses to conflict. Rather, they reflect a broader settler-colonial logic rooted in what Wolfe (2006), in his analysis of global settler-colonial contexts (e.g., Australia, North America), describes as the “logic of elimination”—a structure designed not only to dominate but ultimately to replace the Indigenous population. This system manifests in Israeli systematic strategies viewed in the targeting of Gaza’s civilian infrastructure, the deliberate obstruction of humanitarian aid, and the destruction of cultural, educational, and religious institutions. In the last two, especially since 7 October 2023, these strategies have intensified to a degree that both Amnesty International (2024) and the UN Special Rapporteur Albanese (2024a) argue meet the legal threshold for genocide.

One of the central aims of these policies appears to be the forced displacement of Palestinians. Israel’s recurring campaigns of destruction, its “evacuation orders” that push residents into increasingly unlivable spaces, and the official endorsement of forced displacement as a solution to the “Gaza problem” collectively point to a strategy of engineered depopulation (Albanese, 2024a). Displacement is thus not a side-effect of violence—it is a method.

Yet, in the face of this sustained campaign, Palestinians have responded not solely with organized resistance, but with an extraordinary commitment to land, viewed by many as *sumūd*—steadfastness. This concept, central to the Palestinian ethos, refers to the quiet, everyday refusal to be erased: staying on the land, rebuilding ruined homes, continuing to teach children in makeshift schools, and praying in temporary mosques (Migdad & Buheji, 2024). Through such acts, Palestinians assert a form of resistance that directly contradicts the colonial desire for disappearance. Understanding these acts as political and purposeful is critical. As Joronen (2017) argues, these are not merely strategies of survival—they are forms of refusal, defiance, and the reassertion of life.

This paper investigates the interplay between the Israeli structural strategies designed to transfer Palestinians from Gaza and the equally structured resistance that seeks to remain. By focusing on the recent intensification of forced displacement and the persistent reassertion of presence through *sumūd*, this study explores Gaza not only as a site of violence but also as a site of profound and enduring defiance. This study also contributes to the growing decolonial scholarship on Gaza by centering lived Palestinian voices in understanding structural displacement, settler colonialism, and everyday resistance.

2. Problem Statement

The Gaza Strip represents one of the most densely populated and militarized zones in the world, subjected to an ongoing siege and recurring military assaults that have culminated in catastrophic humanitarian crises. While substantial academic literature has addressed Gaza as a site of occupation, blockade, or humanitarian emergency, there remains a significant analytical gap in understanding the systematic and structural logic underpinning these conditions as expressions of settler colonialism aimed at permanent demographic transformation. Existing research often overlooks the deliberate use of forced displacement not merely as a wartime consequence, but as a strategic mechanism of elimination. This study responds to that gap by examining how Israeli military, legal, political, and media strategies operate to manufacture forced displacement and depopulate Gaza. It also foregrounds Palestinian everyday resistance, particularly *sumūd* (steadfastness), as a coherent, grassroots counter-strategy to settler-colonial efforts to erase Indigenous presence. The brutal assault on Gaza in October 2023 and its aftermath underscore the urgency of this inquiry, as patterns of mass displacement, infrastructural annihilation, and state rhetoric have reached levels that many international observers now characterize as genocidal. A grounded understanding of these dynamics is vital not only for documenting violations of international law, but also for illuminating how colonial violence is resisted not solely through formal political or militant strategies, but through the persistent act of remaining.

3. Research Questions

1. What strategies has Israel employed to make life in Gaza unlivable, and how do these strategies align with policies of forced transfer and ethnic cleansing?
2. What strategies do Palestinians in Gaza employ to practice *sumūd* (steadfastness) and resist forced transfer and ethnic cleansing in their daily lives?

4. Literature Review

4.1. Settler Colonialism and the Logic of the Elimination

Unlike other colonial enterprises, settler colonialism seeks permanent control by displacing and replacing Indigenous peoples (Wolfe, 2006). Wolfe describes it as a “structure not an event,” propelled by a “logic of elimination” that dismantles Indigenous societies to make way for a new order. This description aligns with

Yaghi (2025) examination of Palestine as a constructed sacred geography that underpins processes of elimination. Albanese (2024b) calls Israel's policy "colonial erasure," and Lloyd & Wolfe (2015) stress how these historical patterns still shape military occupations and neoliberal states. From Zionism's earliest days, portraying Palestine as terra nullius has justified dispossession (Bresheeth-Žabner, 2024). Braverman (2024) shows how "frontier ecologies" in the Jawlan-Golan seize land through ecological narratives, while Ram and Handel (2024) label systematic home-destruction "domicide." Englert (2020) sums it up as accumulation by dispossession—all in service of territory (Wolfe, 2006). To understand how these eliminatory strategies translate into human displacement, we will now consider the mechanisms of ethnic cleansing and forced population transfer.

4.2. Ethnic Cleansing and Forced Population Transfer

Ethnic cleansing lies at the core of settler-colonial aims (Gordon & Ram, 2016). The 1948 Nakba expelled some 750,000 - 800,000 Palestinians to create Israel (Hilal, 2021). Hilal (2021) argues Zionism has always sought to cleanse Palestinians. Since 7 October 2023, forced evacuations into dangerous zones and repeated displacements of 90 percent of Gaza's population meet definitions of ethnic cleansing—and arguably genocide (Hasan & Buheji, 2024). Building on these forced removals, Gaza itself has been reshaped into a space of containment, one that extends colonial control behind a facade of infrastructure and restrictions.

4.3. Gaza as a Carceral and Containment Space

Since the 2005 withdrawal and 2007 blockade, Gaza has become an "open-air prison" under remote settler-colonial control. Strict limits on food, water, medicine, and fuel produce a chronic humanitarian crisis Migdad & Buheji (2024), amounting to collective punishment (Amnesty International, 2024: p. 51). Human Rights Watch (2024) documents how denying water is used as a war crime. Repeated offensives have enacted "domicide" and "urbicide," leaving 60–84 per cent of homes in ruins by March 2024 Albanese (2024a/b), a form of slow violence designed to destroy lives (Guillot, Draidi, Cetorelli, Da Silva, & Lubbad, 2025). Underneath these material conditions lies a broader ideology that dehumanises the colonised and justifies their elimination.

4.4. Colonial Mindset and the Dehumanisation of the Colonised

A settler-colonial ideology depends on dehumanising its target (Wolfe, 2006). Tanous (2023) highlights the "minoritization" of Palestinians within Israel; Pappé, Dana, & Nadia (2024) reveal how Israeli academia has sought to erase Palestinian narratives. Since 7 October 2023, senior officials have described Palestinians as "human animals" and equated civilians with combatants (Amnesty International, 2024). Alsemeiri, Elsemeiri, Carroll, & Aljamal (2024) will further dissect these discourses, which underpin calls to "erase" Gaza and expose genocidal intent (Albanese, 2024b). To appreciate how these patterns are applicable beyond Palestine,

we can compare them with other settler-colonial contexts, most notably, Native American removal. This sustained dehumanization is not rhetorical excess; it plays a functional role in justifying extreme policies of destruction. By depicting Palestinians as subhuman or inherently violent, such language erodes moral and legal restraints, enabling large-scale military violence against civilians to be re-framed as security imperatives. Dehumanization thus creates the ideological conditions necessary for settler-colonial elimination to be enacted without accountability or empathy (Alsemeiri et al., 2025).

4.5. Comparative Settler Colonialism: Gaza and Native American Removal

Parallels with Native American dispossession reveal shared patterns of forced removal, land partitioning, and elimination (Kauanui, 2025). U.S. reservations resemble Bantustans in the West Bank and Gaza's enclosure. Salaita (2017) compares the justifications and resistance in both contexts, while Desai (2021) warns against oversimplifying unique legal and historical particularities. Lloyd and Wolfe (2015) note that settler states refine varied strategies for controlling "surplus" populations, providing valuable comparative insights. Post-7 October 2023 marks a sharp escalation of these long-term trends.

4.6. Pre- and Post-October 7, 2023: Shifting Dynamics of Displacement

The Hamas attacks and Israel's subsequent offensive from 7 October 2023 have escalated decades-long displacement to an unprecedented level. Amnesty International (2024) and Albanese (2024b) conclude that Israel's actions constitute genocide. They document vast "domicide," repeated forced relocations into unsafe zones, and the weaponisation of aid and starvation tactics (Browne, 2024). Jamaluddine, Abukmail, Aly, Campbell, & Checchi (2025) estimate 64,260 trauma-related deaths by 30 June 2024—41 per cent above official figures—with 59.1 per cent of victims being women, children, or elderly. Guillot, Draidi, Ceterelli, Da Silva, & Lubbad (2025) record a 34.9-year drop in life expectancy (Oct 2023–Sep 2024). These figures underscore a humanitarian catastrophe driven by deliberate strategies of elimination. Despite this grim reality, the literature also highlights a powerful counter-narrative: the enduring resilience and resistance of the Palestinian people.

5. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in Settler Colonial Theory (Patrick Wolfe, 1999) to investigate Israeli strategies aimed at rendering Gaza uninhabitable and the corresponding Palestinian practices of *sumūd* (steadfastness). The methodology integrates thematic analysis of multiple data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the processes of forced displacement and the resilience of Gaza's population. The first component of the qualitative analysis

focuses on official Israeli government and military statements, along with reports from international organizations and media sources that directly address or document policies and practices of forced displacement, population transfer, and ethnic cleansing. Complementing this, the study draws on thirty semi-structured interviews conducted between 1 June and 1 July with Palestinians from diverse age groups, genders, and geographic areas across Gaza. Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies to ensure the inclusion of a wide range of experiences and perspectives related to displacement, survival, everyday resistance, and *sumūd*. While the data are primarily qualitative, basic descriptive counts (e.g., frequency of themes mentioned) were used to highlight patterns across narratives without reducing the depth and complexity of individual experiences.

6. Data Analysis

This section is organized to analyze two main data sources that reveal the dynamics of forced displacement and Palestinian resilience in Gaza. The first part examines reports and statements issued by Israeli leaders, the United Nations, and media sources documenting strategies and tactics associated with forced displacement. The second part focuses on thirty semi-structured interviews with Palestinians, exploring their practices of *sumūd* (steadfastness) and everyday resistance. Through this dual analysis, the study connects official Israeli strategies with individual lived experiences of displacement and resilience.

6.1. From Occupation to Elimination: The Settler Colonial Design on Gaza

Applying Patrick Wolfe's (2006) Settler Colonial Theory, which frames settler colonialism as an ongoing system aimed at eradicating indigenous populations to secure land, Israel's policies and military strategies in Gaza reveal a deliberate effort to erase the Palestinian presence. This conflict transcends conventional warfare, representing a structural campaign of displacement, where making Gaza unlivable through relentless bombardment, siege, and infrastructure destruction functions as a tool of forced migration. These actions are not only strategic but also ideologically enabled by the dehumanizing discourse discussed earlier. The portrayal of Palestinians as "human animals" or indistinct from combatants strips them of civilian protections under international law, making the deliberate targeting of homes, hospitals, and infrastructure appear permissible or even necessary. The logic of elimination relies on a public and political climate in which Palestinian life is rendered disposable (Alsemeiri et al., 2025). The goal extends beyond territorial control to demographic transformation by systematically removing Palestinians from their homeland. Gaza thus becomes both the stage of violence and the target of elimination.

6.1.1. Erasing Civil Life: The Destruction of Gaza's Infrastructure

Building on Wolfe's (2006) settler-colonial framework, the widespread and sys-

tematic destruction of Gaza's infrastructure should be understood not as incidental collateral damage, but as a strategic measure aimed at depopulating the territory and eroding the resilience of its Indigenous population. By February 2025, a joint damage assessment by the [World Bank \(2025\)](#) estimated reconstruction needs at \$53 billion, highlighting extensive devastation across homes, hospitals, water systems, roads, schools, and government facilities. Entire neighborhoods have been razed, leaving tens of thousands homeless and disoriented. Over 60% of Gaza's housing stock has been damaged or destroyed, and essential public infrastructure has been crippled. Medical facilities, already stressed by the blockade, face systematic targeting that has led to a collapse of health services. Educational institutions, from schools to universities, have been decimated, severely disrupting access to education and breaking generational continuity. This comprehensive destruction of civil infrastructure is consistent with policies aimed at rendering Gaza uninhabitable and coercing its population to migrate, echoing official Israeli rhetoric encouraging Palestinians to "leave Gaza for good" ([ReliefWeb, 2023](#)). The objective transcends military victory to encompass societal fragmentation. By targeting the pillars of daily life—water, electricity, housing, health, and education—Israeli policies manufacture conditions that force migration, turning displacement into an enforced necessity. The destruction serves as both a tangible and symbolic act of domination, designed to erase Palestinians not only from the land but from the possibility of a future there ([Buheji, 2025](#)).

6.1.2. Starvation as a Weapon: Economic Collapse and Manufactured Unlivability in Gaza

The intensified blockade of Gaza since March 2025 has deepened an already severe humanitarian and economic crisis, weaponizing deprivation to pressure displacement. Restrictions on essential goods—including food, water, and medicine—have created acute shortages, drastically worsening living conditions for Gaza's 2.3 million inhabitants.

A report released by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in July 2024 stated that Gaza's GDP has plummeted by 81%, with 82% of businesses destroyed, rendering the local economy nearly non-functional. Key sectors have collapsed: agriculture by 93%, industry by 92%, and construction by 96%. Unemployment rates have soared to 81.7%, and poverty approaches near-total levels ([UNCTAD, 2024](#)). Food security is in crisis, with prices rising up to 400%, making basic sustenance inaccessible to many. Fishermen, barred from accessing the sea due to military restrictions and damage to port infrastructure, resort to catching turtles and foraging for wild plants. Over 80% of agricultural land has been damaged or rendered inaccessible, causing local food production to collapse ([Financial Times, 2025](#)). Health and nutrition conditions are dire, with more than 66,000 children suffering from severe malnutrition as of April 2025 ([Associated Press, 2025](#)). Hospitals are overwhelmed, understaffed, and lacking vital supplies, while restrictions on humanitarian aid exacerbate the crisis—actions many international observers have described as potential war crimes. This sustained

economic destruction fits the settler-colonial logic of elimination through structural means. By rendering Gaza unlivable, the blockade operates as a forced displacement mechanism, pushing Palestinians to leave under conditions of survival necessity. This demographic engineering reflects a deliberate policy to reshape the population in favor of settler expansion.

By early 2025, Gaza's displacement crisis had reached unprecedented proportions. [UNRWA \(2025\)](#) estimates that approximately 1.9 million people—about 90% of Gaza's population—have been displaced, many multiple times, some up to 19 displacements. This mass movement is not merely a byproduct of conflict but part of a deliberate strategy to make Gaza uninhabitable for its Indigenous population. The Israeli military has systematically targeted areas once designated as “safe zones.” For example, the Al-Mawasi area, previously a refuge, has been repeatedly bombed, causing civilian casualties, including children ([The United Nations Office at Geneva, 2025](#)). Such actions undermine any sense of security, leaving civilians without safe shelter. Additionally, evacuation orders cover nearly 80% of Gaza, pushing residents into ever smaller, more dangerous areas. Security corridors, such as the Morag Corridor, fragment the territory further, restricting movement and access to essential services ([UNRWA, 2025](#)). This calculated pattern of displacement and territorial fragmentation is consistent with strategies aimed at weakening Indigenous resilience. By dismantling infrastructure and eroding safety, these measures force Palestinians to abandon their homeland, advancing the settler-colonial goal of territorial and demographic control.

6.1.3. Official Endorsement of Population Transfer

Israeli government officials have openly endorsed the relocation of Palestinians from Gaza under the guise of humanitarian reasoning. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has called for Gaza's “complete destruction” and population displacement to other countries. In March 2025, he announced plans to establish a governmental “migration administration” to facilitate Palestinian emigration, emphasizing that budgeting was no obstacle ([The Times of Israel, 2025](#)). Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has similarly framed the military offensive as necessary to occupy Gaza fully and displace its population for their “own protection.” Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu has advocated starvation as a tactic to prompt emigration, suggesting civilians fearful for their lives should comply with the “emigration plan,” which is a forced displacement ([Yeni Şafak, 2025](#)). These statements reflect official policy trends aiming to remove Palestinians from Gaza, consistent with demographic re-engineering efforts.

6.1.4. Targeting Knowledge and Leadership: Killing the Future

The systematic destruction of Gaza's educational infrastructure threatens the continuity of Palestinian leadership and cultural identity. By early 2025, [UNRWA \(2025\)](#) reported approximately 660,000 children out of school, with 88% of schools damaged or destroyed. The Ministry of Education estimates that around 15,000 school-age children and 800 education workers have been killed since the

conflict began, leaving a traumatized generation (Middle East Eye, 2025). Higher education has been similarly devastated. All 19 universities in Gaza have been destroyed, and at least 150 university professors—including three rectors—have been killed. Institutions such as the Islamic University of Gaza and Al-Azhar University have been demolished, effectively erasing academic infrastructure. This destruction aligns with efforts to eradicate Indigenous identity by dismantling institutions that cultivate future leaders and preserve cultural heritage, disrupting not only education but the societal framework necessary for Palestinian resilience.

6.1.5. Cultural Genocide: The Erasure of Identity and Memory

Cultural heritage in Gaza has suffered unprecedented destruction, threatening Palestinian collective memory and identity. Since October 2023, UNESCO (2025) has verified damage to over 100 cultural sites, including 13 religious sites, 69 historically and artistically significant buildings, and 7 archaeological locations. Notably, the Great Omari Mosque, Gaza's oldest and most significant mosque, was destroyed in an Israeli airstrike in December 2023, with ancient manuscripts lost in the airstrike (Al Jazeera, 2024). Experts characterize this widespread devastation as cultural genocide aimed at erasing Palestinian historical presence. The destruction severs the links between people and their heritage, undermining collective memory. Targeting cultural and religious landmarks is a broader tactic to dismantle societal structures and historical continuity, reinforcing narratives that deny Palestinian claims to their ancestral land (Berji, 2024).

6.2. The Faces Behind the Numbers: Semi-Structured Interviews on Displacement and Resilience

Following the thematic analysis of official Israeli government and military statements, alongside international reports that have highlighted the mechanisms of forced displacement, population transfer, and ethnic cleansing, this section shifts focus to the lived experiences of those directly impacted by these policies. Through thirty semi-structured interviews with displaced Palestinians in Gaza, this section explores how individuals perceive and respond to the processes of displacement, survival, and resistance in the context of the settler colonial logic of elimination. These personal accounts provide essential insight into the human impact of the policies discussed previously, revealing the on-the-ground realities of displacement, survival, and resilience in the face of systemic violence. See **Table 1**.

Table 1. Frequency of displacement.

Number of Times Displaced	Number of Interviewees	Percentage
1 - 5 times	4	13%
6 - 10 times	5	17%
More than 10 times	21	70%
Total	30	100%

The data from **Table 1** present a harrowing picture of chronic displacement in Gaza. A staggering 70% of the interviewees reported being displaced more than ten times since the beginning of the war, reflecting the cyclical and unrelenting nature of Israeli military campaigns that systematically target civilian areas. One participant described the psychological toll of constant displacement: “We pack our lives in bags again and again. Every time we think we’ve found safety, the bombs follow us.” Another echoed the pain of loss but also resolve: “They destroyed my house three times, but I will rebuild it three times more if I have to. This is our land.” These repeated waves of displacement are not coincidental—they are part of a broader settler colonial strategy aimed at exhausting Palestinian society and severing its connection to the land. Each forced movement breaks down social infrastructure, tears apart communities, and disrupts any sense of stability. Yet, the fact that Palestinians continue to survive through this shows the powerful presence of *sumūd*—the Palestinian doctrine of steadfastness. Despite the trauma, many of the displaced keep returning to their destroyed homes, rebuilding them with basic materials, and restarting their lives, even if only under nylon and wood. This demonstrates an extraordinary resilience that challenges the intended goals of displacement. These figures reinforce the interpretation of displacement not as a side effect of war but as an engineered mechanism of control and depopulation.

6.2.1. Spatial Defiance: Responses to Israeli Evacuation Orders in Rafah

The following table illustrates how displaced Palestinians responded to Israeli military orders to evacuate to Rafah, which was designated as a “safe zone.” The majority of interviewees rejected the directive, reflecting a broader pattern of mistrust, strategic resistance, and refusal to be confined to militarized zones under settler colonial control.

Table 2 reveals a critical insight into the agency and strategic awareness of Palestinians under fire. When ordered by the Israeli military to evacuate to Rafah—a directive presented as a “safe zone”—60% of participants refused to comply and chose to flee in the opposite direction. As one interviewee put it: “When they told us to go to Rafah, we knew it was a trap. People went there and were bombed anyway. So, we ran in the opposite direction.” Another explained, “I would rather sleep in the open than walk into their so-called ‘safe zone.’” This pattern of defiance reflects a deep-seated mistrust of Israeli intentions, grounded in lived experience. For many, such instructions have led to further bombardment or entrapment in high-density zones, where humanitarian conditions are catastrophic. The refusal to go to Rafah is not simply a survival tactic; it is a form of resistance—a rejection of externally imposed routes that often lead to greater danger. This behavior illustrates how Palestinians are not passive victims but active agents navigating a violent geography with calculated caution. Their decisions also reflect a broader resistance to being herded into shrinking and militarized enclaves. This spatial refusal aligns with Scott’s theory of everyday resistance, where subtle acts like changing direction or staying put undermine the designs of power. It is also a

direct rejection of the settler colonial attempt to fragment, isolate, and ultimately evacuate the population.

Table 2. Response to Israeli orders to move to Rafah.

Response to Israeli Directive to Go to Rafah	Number of Interviewees	Percentage
Moved toward Rafah	12	40%
moved in the opposite direction)	18	60%
Total	30	100%

6.2.2. Everyday Acts of Sumūd: Adaptation and Survival Strategies under Displacement

This table captures the grassroots strategies Palestinians employed to survive and maintain dignity during displacement. From digging for water to building makeshift schools and preserving religious education, these practices reflect not only resilience but also a deliberate refusal to surrender identity, community, and hope under conditions of colonial violence.

The strategies shown in **Table 3** highlight a sophisticated system of grassroots resilience and adaptation that Palestinians deploy in the absence of formal support systems. One father described how he taught his children under a nylon tent: “We lost everything, but I still teach my kids to read the Qur’an every night. If we lose that, we lose ourselves.” A young woman explained, “We dug the ground with our hands to find water. No one came to help. But we helped each other.” These practices are born not only from necessity but from a deep commitment to preserving life, identity, and dignity. Digging for water in dry ground, building makeshift mosques and schools out of tents, and returning to rubble to create shelter from tarps and wood—all of these acts demonstrate the ingenuity and moral determination of a besieged people. Teaching children and memorizing the Qur’an during displacement serve as cultural anchors, preserving both spiritual and national identity under attack. These are not mere survival tactics; they are acts of sumūd. They embody the collective refusal to be erased and the insistence on continuity in education, worship, and community life. These practices challenge the colonial logic that assumes displacement leads to disintegration. Instead, Palestinians transform displacement into an arena of moral assertion, where everyday actions push back against the narrative of defeat.

Table 3. Adaptation and survival strategies.

Strategy Used during Displacement	Number of Interviewees	Percentage
Digging land to find water	20	67%
Building temporary mosques and schools with tents	22	73%
Teaching children and memorizing Qur’an during displacement	23	77%
Returning to destroyed homes and building tents with nylon	19	63%

6.2.3. Home as Resistance: Rejecting the Logic of Forced Migration

This table explores displaced Palestinians' perspectives on migration, revealing a dominant desire to remain in Gaza despite devastating conditions. For many, staying is an act of resistance against forced depopulation, while migration, when considered, is viewed not as an opportunity, but as a last resort or a temporary necessity tied to return.

In **Table 4**, we see a clear majority (80%) expressing their determination to remain in Gaza despite all adversities. This reflects a profound emotional and political attachment to the land and a deeply rooted understanding that "migration" forced displacement is part of the Israeli strategy to depopulate Gaza. For these participants, leaving Gaza is not seen as a path to safety, but as a form of coerced erasure. Their resistance is grounded in a worldview that values steadfastness as a form of justice, where enduring suffering is a sacrifice for the collective memory and survival of the Palestinian people. While a smaller proportion (20%) expressed openness to migration, this group mostly cited desperation, lack of basic services, or the complete destruction of their homes. Importantly, 27% showed conditional openness to temporary migration—but only for education or medical treatment, and with a clear intent to return. This nuance reveals that migration is not framed as an opportunity or escape, but rather as a forced necessity under extreme conditions. Return, in this context, is not just a personal preference but a political right and an existential claim.

Table 4. Attitudes toward Migration.

Position on Migration	Number of Interviewees	Percentage
Prefer to stay in Gaza under all conditions.	24	80%
See migration as the only option remaining.	6	20%
Open to temporary migration for study or medical reasons.	8	27%

6.2.4. Staying Power: Presence as an Act of Resistance

This section examines the ideological and emotional meanings Palestinians attach to staying in Gaza under genocide and ethnic cleansing. As **Table 5** shows, the majority of participants perceive remaining on their land not merely as endurance, but as active resistance. In a context where displacement is a strategic tool of settler colonialism, the decision to stay becomes a political stance, rooted in *sumūd*, sovereignty, and the refusal to disappear.

Table 5. Perception of staying as resistance.

Is staying in Gaza seen as resistance?	Number of Interviewees	Percentage
Yes	26	87%
No	4	13%

The final table underscores a key ideological and emotional cornerstone of Pal-

estinian endurance: 87% of interviewees explicitly view staying in Gaza as an act of resistance. This is not a symbolic claim, but a deeply lived experience. For these individuals, remaining on their land—even when it is bombed, leveled, and stripped of basic infrastructure—is a declaration of sovereignty and a spiritual duty. This perspective aligns with the principle of *sumūd*, where endurance itself becomes a political weapon against settler colonialism. The belief that remaining rooted in Gaza prevents the completion of the Israeli goal of displacement reinforces the power of presence. Even in tents, ruins, or temporary shelters, their existence stands as defiance. It is a non-violent but profoundly powerful stance that transforms civilian presence into political resistance. The minority who do not see staying as resistance often cite hopelessness, fear, or exhaustion, illustrating the emotional toll of continued trauma. Yet even these voices confirm the pressure Palestinians are under—pressures that, rather than breaking collective will, seem to deepen the resolve of most.

7. Discussion

The findings do more than document the war-induced displacement of Gazans; they offer a critical indictment of a long-standing strategy of dispossession and erasure that reflects the logic of settler colonialism. The scale and repetition of displacement—where over 70% of participants reported being displaced more than ten times—highlight a pattern that is neither incidental nor temporary. Rather, it mirrors what scholars such as [Pappe \(2007\)](#) have described as a project of incremental ethnic cleansing, in which forced displacement is methodically and recursively deployed to fragment the Palestinian social fabric, exhaust resistance, and advance demographic engineering. This strategy evokes comparisons with historical campaigns of ethnic cleansing, such as those witnessed during the Bosnian War in the 1990s, where forced relocations were systematically used to create ethnically homogeneous enclaves under the guise of national security ([Kaldor, 2007](#)).

Furthermore, the refusal of 60% of participants to follow Israeli evacuation orders to the southern area of Rafah, choosing instead to flee in the opposite direction, further dismantles the prevailing Israeli narrative of “safe zones.” These zones are not perceived by the local population as havens but as traps, which aligns with recent reports from the [OCHA \(2024\)](#) documenting airstrikes on areas explicitly designated as safe by the Israeli military. This scenario recalls the tragic precedent of Srebrenica in 1995, when Bosnian Muslims were slaughtered after seeking refuge in a UN-designated safe area ([Power, 2013](#)). While the international legal frameworks and actors involved differ significantly, Srebrenica unfolded under the watch of UN peacekeepers during a civil war—both cases demonstrate how “safe zones” can become sites of betrayal and mass violence under the guise of protection. In Gaza, such zones serve to obscure international accountability, framing displacement as voluntary or humanitarian, when in fact it is militarized and coercive. The refusal to comply with evacuation orders thus

emerges as a potent form of agency, echoing what [Scott \(2007\)](#) terms “weapons of the weak,” subtle yet meaningful acts of resistance against overwhelming power.

Moreover, the everyday survival strategies employed by displaced people, such as digging for water, creating temporary tent schools and mosques, and teaching children the Qur’an, are not merely acts of resilience but deliberate expressions of defiance. These forms of endurance echo [Hammami \(2020\)](#)’s argument that Palestinian women’s domestic and reproductive labour during times of siege constitutes a powerful form of resistance. Similarly, [Tawil-Souri & Aouragh \(2014\)](#) emphasize that even digital communication under occupation becomes a site of struggle, where narratives of survival actively contest political erasure. These acts fall within the broader tradition of *sumūd* (steadfastness), which is not simply a cultural ideal but a political project aimed at countering displacement with presence, and destruction with continuity. In contrast to cases such as the Circassian expulsion by Tsarist Russia in the 19th century, where relocation was part of an imperial strategy to secure the Caucasus and where many were deported across borders into the Ottoman Empire ([Richmond, 2013](#)), Palestinians in Gaza have refused to leave their land despite relentless bombardment, siege, and the threat of extermination. While the geopolitical conditions and historical periods differ, both instances reflect a settler-colonial logic that seeks to erase indigenous presence. Their unwavering determination to stay and rebuild transforms survival into an act of resistance.

The issue of displacement revealed further complexities. While 80% of respondents rejected the idea outright, viewing it as a form of dispossession, a smaller group expressed conditional openness to migration, especially if framed as temporary or tied to educational and professional aspirations. This ambivalence reflects both the weaponisation of displacement by the occupier and the internalised moral calculus of the occupied. Unlike Syrian displacement, which was often seen as a necessity for survival amid a multi-factional civil war, [Chatty \(2018\)](#) notes that Palestinians in Gaza understand such displacement not as voluntary migration, but as political exile and forced removal. It is perceived as an erosion of collective identity and a silent concession to the goals of settler colonialism. [Peteet \(2005\)](#) captures this dynamic by framing the land not merely as a place of residence but as the embodiment of history, theology, and national dignity. To leave is not simply to survive—it is, in many eyes, to abandon a sacred trust.

Furthermore, what is often referred to as “voluntary migration” is, in reality, a manipulative term employed by Israeli authorities to obscure the true objective: the expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland. Any large-scale population movement occurring under conditions of bombardment, siege, and genocidal violence cannot be genuinely voluntary. According to United Nations standards, human rights conventions, and international law, such movements constitute forced displacement, regardless of the terminology used to justify them. In this context, it is also important to recognize the mechanisms by which Israel has attempted to facilitate displacement, and the counter-forces that have undermined

these efforts. Displacement has been encouraged through propaganda campaigns promising food and safety in Rafah and through international discourse such as that of U.S. leadership, suggesting that Gaza is no longer viable for habitation. Additionally, the emergence of looting militias reportedly affiliated with the occupying forces has further destabilized access to aid and inflated local prices, contributing to a sense of desperation. Yet, these efforts have not succeeded in engineering mass flight. The collective memory of the 1948 Nakba and the suffering of earlier exiles have strengthened community resistance to leaving. Recent accounts shared through social networks also attest to the trauma of departure, discouraging others from following suit.

Perhaps the most important finding in this study is that 87% of participants viewed staying in Gaza as an act of resistance and Sumūd. This reframes the notion of remaining as politically generative rather than passive. In the tradition of other anti-colonial struggles—such as Algerian resistance to French settler colonialism, where staying becomes a declaration of refusal [Fanon, Jean-Paul, & Farington \(1963\)](#), remaining constitutes a challenge to the very premise of settler colonialism, which relies on the disappearance of the native. Unlike Native American nations such as the Cherokee, who were forcibly relocated during the Trail of Tears [Perdue & Green \(2007\)](#), Palestinians have been insisting on asserting their presence despite bombardment, siege, and deprivation. In this context, survival is not apolitical; it is a form of what is called “necropolitical resistance,” where life itself becomes a refusal of death’s dominance.

In sum, the findings support the conclusion that the displacement of Palestinians in Gaza is not a by-product of war but a central mechanism of settler-colonial domination. The participants’ decisions to remain, rebuild, and resist, even in the absence of basic needs, represent a collective form of political consciousness that transcends individual suffering. These findings contribute to broader comparative studies of ethnic cleansing and colonial violence by highlighting the intersection of memory, mobility, and resistance among Gazans. Through their daily choices, they assert a political claim to land, identity, and the right to a future. In this context, I propose the term “Zionocidize” to characterize the systematic use of genocidal violence under the ideological justification of Zionism—a process in which forced displacement, infrastructural destruction, and demographic erasure are framed as security measures while advancing a settler-colonial objective. Finally, the ongoing military operation known as “Gideon’s Chariots” represents a severe and deliberate escalation in Israel’s strategy of forced displacement and ethnic cleansing ([Al Jazeera, 2025](#)). This campaign intensifies an already devastating pattern of repeated expulsions, thrusting Palestinians into an unprecedented state of crisis. The frequency and scale of these displacements have dramatically increased, exacerbating the community’s vulnerability and pushing its very existence to the brink. The situation constitutes one of the most critical and urgent threats faced by Palestinians in recent history. Furthermore, unconditional support from the Trump administration, particularly its consistent defense of Israel in international

forums such as the United Nations, has further emboldened Israeli authorities and contributed to the escalation of human rights violations (Elsemeiri, Alsemeiri, & Alzaem, 2025).

8. Conclusion

In the face of escalating Israeli campaigns of forced displacement, most recently embodied in the “Gideon’s Chariots” operation, Palestinians stand at the edge of an existential crisis. While this study highlights critical strategies of *sumūd* (steadfastness), including grassroots documentation, community education, preservation of cultural identity, and local self-organization, such measures alone—though vital—cannot wholly counter the machinery of state-led ethnic cleansing. These practices form the core of Palestinian resilience and serve as a bulwark against erasure. However, they must be embedded within a broader framework that includes international legal mechanisms, political accountability, and global solidarity. These measures could include targeted sanctions on individuals and entities directly involved in orchestrating forced displacement, strengthened enforcement of international humanitarian law through bodies like the International Criminal Court, and increased support for Palestinian-led human rights documentation initiatives. Additionally, global solidarity might take the form of coordinated diplomatic pressure from states, grassroots advocacy campaigns raising awareness internationally, and economic boycotts designed to challenge the structures enabling settler-colonial violence. Preventing the complete displacement of Palestinians requires more than survival; it demands coordinated global action that confronts settler-colonial structures, amplifies Palestinian voices, and holds perpetrators accountable. Only through the fusion of internal resistance and external justice can the tide of ethnic cleansing be turned.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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