

Two Years On: The Unbearable Cost of War for a Generation of Children

Today marks two years since the Hamas-led attacks in Israel on 7 October 2023. Those attacks and Israel's large-scale military campaign in the ensuing years entailed serious violations of international law, including war crimes and other international crimes. Amidst all these outrages, one of the most disturbing aspects of the hostilities has been their devastating impact on children.

Trauma, loss, and deprivation endured in the formative years of childhood can have lifelong consequences, cutting short opportunities and destroying prospects. When such experiences are not limited to individuals but are shared by an entire generation, their deleterious effects are likely to reverberate across an entire society, undermining its foundations and threatening its cohesion, resilience, and future.

For these reasons, international law places particular emphasis on the protection of children. States are obliged to safeguard children under their jurisdiction and control, and parties to armed conflict must take special care to shield them from harm. Adherence to these obligations is crucial to prevent the cycle of violence from consuming future generations.

By contrast, the Hamas-led attack of 7 October 2023 and violations committed in the context of Israel's ensuing military operations in Gaza have exposed children to the horrors of war, deepening wounds that will take decades to heal and entrenching enmity between peoples. Children on both sides of the conflict have been killed, injured, and countless others have been exposed to extreme violence, including the traumatic experience of family members being killed, taken hostage, or subjected to arbitrary detention, and of witnessing the destruction of their home or school. Beyond immediate physical injuries, grief, and fear, these experiences leave deep psychological scars on children and their community.

The magnitude of the destruction in Gaza in particular has devastated the lives of an entire generation of children, with terrible consequences for the Palestinian people as a whole. By [December 2023](#), Gaza was already being described as 'the most dangerous place in the world to be a child'. Two years into the hostilities, this tragic reality has only deepened. As of [September 2025](#), more than 20,000 children have been killed, and more than 42,000 have been injured, with at least 21,000 left

with disabilities. In Gaza – which now has the highest number of child amputees per capita anywhere in the world – children surviving amputations endure not only the trauma of life-changing injury, but also chronic shortages of rehabilitation, [prosthetics](#), and assistive [services](#), further undermining their health, dignity, and recovery. Famine has been [confirmed](#) in Gaza Governorate and is spreading, with more than 150 children already dead from [starvation or malnutrition](#). Children have been shot and killed even at sites designated for aid distribution, including those established under a [controversial Israeli scheme](#) purporting to deliver aid.

In addition, around one million children have been displaced, many [repeatedly](#). Approximately 40,000 have [lost one or both parents](#), and humanitarian organisations have been reporting a rising number of children falling within a grim new category: ‘[wounded child, no surviving family](#)’. As the new school year starts, at least 658,000 children in Gaza have [no access to formal education](#) for the third consecutive year, with more than 97% of schools having sustained [damage](#). Severely damaged healthcare infrastructure, acute shortages of medicine and clean water, and the spread of disease compound the suffering of children who have already endured unimaginable trauma.

While Gaza is being decimated, the devastating repercussions of the hostilities that began on 7 October 2023 exceed the enclave and are felt across the whole of the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the situation has also deteriorated sharply. Since 7 October 2023, at least 210 children have been [killed](#) and more than 1,100 [injured](#) by Israeli forces or due to [settler violence](#). Widespread [movement restrictions](#), school demolitions, and the [closure](#) of UNRWA schools in East Jerusalem have deprived thousands of children of their [right to education](#).

Hundreds of Palestinian children from Gaza and the West Bank are currently [detained](#) by Israel, with over a third held in administrative detention, without charge or trial. Denied family contact and access to a lawyer, many are reportedly subjected to [ill-treatment](#).

Israel’s conduct in the oPt reflects a sustained failure to meet its obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law. In the conduct of hostilities, Israel must comply with the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions. As the occupying power, it has a cardinal obligation to maintain and restore, as far as possible, public order and civil life in the

oPt, which includes ensuring the safety and well-being of children. This requires not only refraining from attacks on civilian infrastructure and educational facilities, but also facilitating their proper functioning – by taking action of its own in support of local authorities, or by allowing other organisations to provide relief, such as UNRWA.

Over the past decades, and in particular since October 2023, Israel's conduct towards Palestinian children has been marked by blatant and persistent violations of its obligations under international law, with devastating consequences for generations of Palestinian children and for the Palestinian people as a whole. By shattering so many of the young lives on which the Palestinian people's future depends, Israel's violent and repressive actions threaten Palestinians' very ability to survive as a people and to realise their right to self-determination.

The international community, too, bears responsibility. Under Common Article 1 to the Geneva Conventions, all States have an obligation to ensure respect for IHL by [others](#) that are party to an armed conflict. With respect to children, this obligation is reinforced by [Article 38](#) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which requires States parties – nearly all States – to ensure respect for IHL rules that are relevant to the child. Third States also bear obligations to cooperate to ensure the realisation of Palestinian children's human rights (under the [UN Charter](#) and core human rights treaties, including the [CRC](#)). These duties require third States to do everything in their power to prevent, punish, and bring an end to violations, including through diplomatic, economic, and judicial avenues.

These duties also align with the imperative of protecting the Palestinian people as a collective, which requires more than formal recognition of the State of Palestine: it demands safeguarding the children on whom the Palestinian people's future depends. The right to self-determination entails the ability of a people to sustain its existence through future generations. Protecting Palestinian children is therefore inseparable from ensuring the effective exercise of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination.

Two years after 7 October 2023, Palestinian children have endured loss and suffering on an unfathomable scale. Protecting them is both a legal and a moral imperative. Ensuring their safety, dignity, and future is also essential to preserving the Palestinian people's existence and to building the foundations for peace and justice in a place afflicted by a bitter and longstanding conflict that has plunged to even darker depths in the last two years.