

Highlighting the Rights of Children with Disabilities Amid the Ongoing Israeli Aggression on the Besieged Gaza Strip

In light of the dire conditions resulting from the ongoing aggression against the besieged Gaza Strip, children with disabilities face serious violations of their fundamental rights, beginning with the right to life, followed by their rights to healthcare, psychosocial support, and access to humanitarian assistance. These children, who are already among the most marginalized due to entrenched discrimination, lack of accessibility, and insufficient inclusive services, are now enduring compounded vulnerabilities. They are directly impacted by indiscriminate violence, forced displacement, and the destruction of assistive devices critical to their mobility and care. Healthcare services have been severely disrupted, while essential medicines, medical supplies, and nutritional supplements remain unavailable due to restricted humanitarian access. The destruction of critical infrastructure, including roads and transportation networks, has exacerbated barriers to mobility, and shelters for displaced populations are neither safe nor accessible for children with disabilities. This has led to a sharp deterioration in their humanitarian and health conditions, an increase in disabilities resulting from the conflict, and rising numbers of casualties due to the lack of adequate and inclusive emergency responses.

There remains a significant challenge in accurately understanding and applying **the concept of disability** as contained under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This challenge has resulted in **unrealistic figures and indicators** regarding the number of victims with disabilities—both children and adults—particularly within the Gaza Strip over the previous seven Israeli military aggressions since 2006, further exacerbated by the ongoing comprehensive Israeli military aggression since October 7, 2023. A statement by United Nations experts on October 25, 2024, titled “**A Tragedy Within a Tragedy**,” provides one of the most relevant reflections of the situation, consistent with the CRPD’s definition of disability. The statement describes the devastating humanitarian conditions faced by persons with disabilities—including children, women, older persons, and men—within the besieged Gaza Strip. It highlights the compounded impact of one year of ongoing international crimes, including acts amounting to genocide. The statement emphasizes: “Many of the approximately **100,000 Palestinians injured in Gaza are expected to sustain long-term disabilities**, requiring rehabilitation, assistive devices, psychosocial support, and other essential services, all of which remain critically inadequate within the Strip.”

The statement by UN experts further emphasized: “The impact extends beyond physical injuries to include severe emotional and psychological trauma, broader implications for the social fabric, and increased burdens on families and communities, particularly on women, who shoulder the greatest caregiving responsibilities¹.” QADER for Community Development asserts that there is a significant likelihood that every child in Gaza may experience some form of disability, as defined in Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This is particularly relevant to children and also applies to tens of thousands of women, men, and older persons. Disability has become one of the most significant manifestations of aggression on the victims, especially given its ongoing and intensifying nature. The situation is further exacerbated by the collapse of healthcare services, with most hospitals rendered inoperative, compounded by widespread starvation and the denial of access to essential humanitarian assistance, including aid specific to the needs of persons with disabilities. This underscores the profound marginalization, even at the basic level of identifying the number of child victims with disabilities, before addressing the international protection obligations under relevant international conventions in situations of armed conflict and military occupation.

In a press statement issued on October 25, 2024, titled “**A Tragedy Within a Tragedy**,” UN experts expressed grave concern over the dire conditions faced by Palestinians with disabilities trapped in the Gaza Strip. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), quoting the UN experts, stated: “A tragedy within a tragedy is unfolding in Gaza, where Israel’s genocidal campaign has left persons with disabilities without any protection. Persons with disabilities are being killed and injured in indiscriminate attacks, despite posing no security threat, underscoring Israel’s deliberate assault on civilians².”

We affirm that the systematic and widespread military attacks targeting the fundamental rights of children with disabilities were not limited to the recent comprehensive offensive on the Gaza Strip but reflect a deliberate and **systemized policy** aimed at persons with disabilities, particularly during previous Israeli military operations in Gaza. This was confirmed by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry established by the Human Rights Council in May 2018, in the context of the large-scale protests of March 30, 2018, known as the “**Great March of Return and the Lifting of the Siege on Gaza**.” The Commission’s findings, reflected in its report adopted by the Human Rights Council in 2019, included key

¹ Statement by UN experts, titled: “A Tragedy within a Tragedy”, at the link: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/10/tragedy-within-tragedy-un-experts-alarmed-harrowing-conditions-palestinians>

² See OHCHR Webpage, at the link: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/10/tragedy-within-tragedy-un-experts-alarmed-harrowing-conditions-palestinians>

conclusions, notably that: "Nothing justifies the killing or injuring of journalists, paramedics, or individuals who pose no direct threat of death or serious injury to those around them. **Even more concerning is the targeting of children and persons with disabilities.**" The Commission further stated that "there are reasonable grounds to believe that Israeli snipers deliberately targeted journalists, paramedics, children, and persons with disabilities, fully aware of their identities." The Commission considered these grave breaches of international humanitarian law and international human rights law to amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The United Nations Human Rights Council adopted the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry on the Great March of Return on March 22, 2019 (A/HRC/40/L.25), along with three other related resolutions.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has stated that "children in the occupied Palestinian territories are living in a constant state of violence that endangers their lives and jeopardizes their physical and mental health³." Human Rights Watch, in an article published on September 30, 2024, highlighted that **the ongoing blockade of Gaza has caused disproportionate harm to children with disabilities, who were already in a vulnerable situation and are particularly at risk of enduring long-term psychological damage**⁴. According to UNICEF reports, the destruction of infrastructure is exacerbating the challenges faced by children with disabilities, hindering their access to essential services and making them more susceptible to compounded harm, thereby increasing their vulnerability in the context of ongoing aggression⁵. During a United Nations Security Council briefing on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian issue, on October 9, 2024, Lisa Dutton, a representative from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), remarked: **"Every day, according to UNRWA, 10 children lose one or both of their legs. Gaza has become home to the largest group of child amputees in modern history."**⁶

The Israeli military has systematically targeted many operational hospitals in Gaza during its large-scale offensive, including those offering critical services **to persons with disabilities**. Key facilities such as **Sheikh Hamad Hospital for Rehabilitation and Prosthetics, Al-Wafa Medical Rehabilitation**

³ OHCHR Website, at the following link: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2024/05/palestinians-disabilities-subject-unbearable-consequences-ongoing-hostilities>

⁴ Human Rights Watch website, at the following link: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/30/gaza-israeli-attacks-devastate-lives-children-disabilities>

⁵ United Nations website, at the following link: <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2024/10/1135541>

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Hospital, the Assistive Devices Center of the Palestinian Medical Relief Society, the Palestinian General Union of Persons with Disabilities headquarters in the northern governorates, and Al-Amal Center for Capacity Development, affiliated with the Red Crescent in Gaza, have all sustained **significant damage**⁷. This deliberate targeting has worsened the already dire conditions for children with disabilities in Gaza, as health and specialized disability care services have collapsed. These attacks have posed a severe threat to the health and lives of persons with various types of disabilities, exacerbating the already critical gaps in meeting their needs in the Gaza Strip⁸.

There is a **significant shortage** in the needs and requirements of persons with disabilities of all types, including children with disabilities. This is coupled with a drastic reduction in the entry of life-saving humanitarian aid into Gaza. The limited aid that does enter Gaza does not cover the specific needs of persons with disabilities, particularly those of children. The severity of the crisis is not only related to the **quantity of aid**, but also to **its type** and whether it meets the life-saving needs of persons with disabilities. A growing shortage of essential items, such as **prosthetics, wheelchairs, crutches, hearing aids, medical mattresses, nutritional supplements, disability-related medications, medical equipment, clothing, sanitary pads, medical consumables, and other necessary items**, has been reported. Furthermore, **these critical needs for children with disabilities have not received the required attention from UN bodies, international organizations, and states**, leading to a significant deterioration in the health of a large number of persons with disabilities, particularly children, and an alarming increase in fatalities among them. These observations have been corroborated by field monitoring and documentation by the QADER's team, which continues to collect evidence and eyewitness testimony regarding these violations.

⁷ A joint press release was issued on February 8, 2024, by three Palestinian human rights organizations: the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR), Al-Haq, and Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, focusing on the ongoing violations and human rights concerns in Gaz, at the following link: <https://www.alhaq.org/ar/advocacy/22636.html>.

⁸ For more information, see the QADER's report on "The Impact of the Israeli Aggression on Gaza on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – Monitoring Violations, Legal Analysis, Avenues for Accountability, and Effective Remedies," April 2024, available at the link: <https://www.qader.org/resources/6086.html>

According to testimonies collected by the QADER's field team in Gaza, families of children with disabilities are facing extreme difficulties in accessing humanitarian aid. The limited aid they have received does not meet the life-saving needs of persons with disabilities, particularly children. These essential needs include nutritional support such as **milk, vitamins, supplements, and disability-specific medications, along with critical items like assistive devices, medical consumables, and other required medical supplies.** The aid entering Gaza since the full closure has not addressed these specific needs, further exacerbating the already dire situation and posing significant threats to the lives of children with disabilities in the Gaza Strip.

Children in Gaza, particularly those with disabilities, face severe health risks due to the **lack of timely access to essential vaccinations**, including against polio. The situation has worsened with the emergence of confirmed cases of polio among children. These challenges are exacerbated by the ongoing large-scale Israeli military aggression, the systematic targeting of civilians and civilian objects, widespread destruction, and the frequent displacement of populations. Moreover, the Israeli authorities have obstructed the entry of vaccines and the operation of healthcare teams in the region. UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a joint statement in August 2024, urging the resumption of polio vaccination campaigns in Gaza. They emphasized that the failure to carry out these vaccination efforts endangers children's health, particularly those with disabilities who rely on continuous healthcare services.

From this brief overview, we reiterate the urgent **call** for the international community to ensure that children with disabilities receive the special international protection mandated under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), United Nations Security Council Resolution 2475 (2019), which affirms the necessity of protecting persons with disabilities during armed conflicts and emergency humanitarian responses, as well as other international standards. This protection should be given **top priority** in all advocacy campaigns, international conferences, and other relevant forums, including your esteemed conference, to guarantee effective emergency humanitarian response and life-saving assistance. It is also critical to pursue accountability through various channels to ensure an end to the grave violations of international law and international crimes, as documented by evidence, affecting children—particularly children with disabilities, as well as women, men, and the elderly. Accountability for these crimes must be pursued, and effective redress for victims must be secured.