

# War on Gaza: where everyone is left behind



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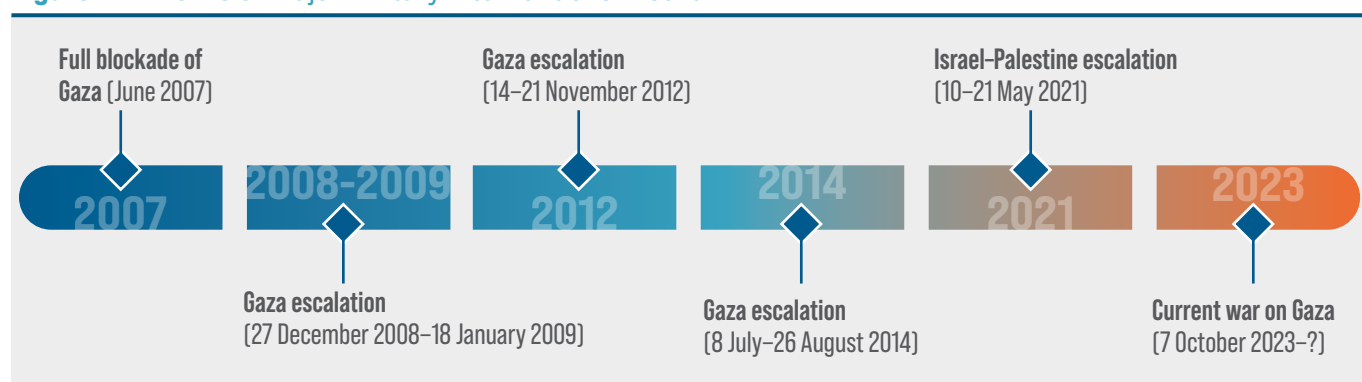
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## 1. Background

In 2007, Israel imposed an indefinite blockade on the Gaza Strip, severely restricting the movement of people and goods in and out of the enclave. Subsequently, a series of major military escalations were waged, namely in 2008–2009, 2012, 2014, 2021 and now in

2023 (figure 1). The blockade on Gaza, coupled with these violent offensives, has resulted in perpetual de-development and an ongoing humanitarian crisis that have condemned the population of Gaza, including women and girls, to be left behind.

**Figure 1.** Timeline of major military interventions in Gaza

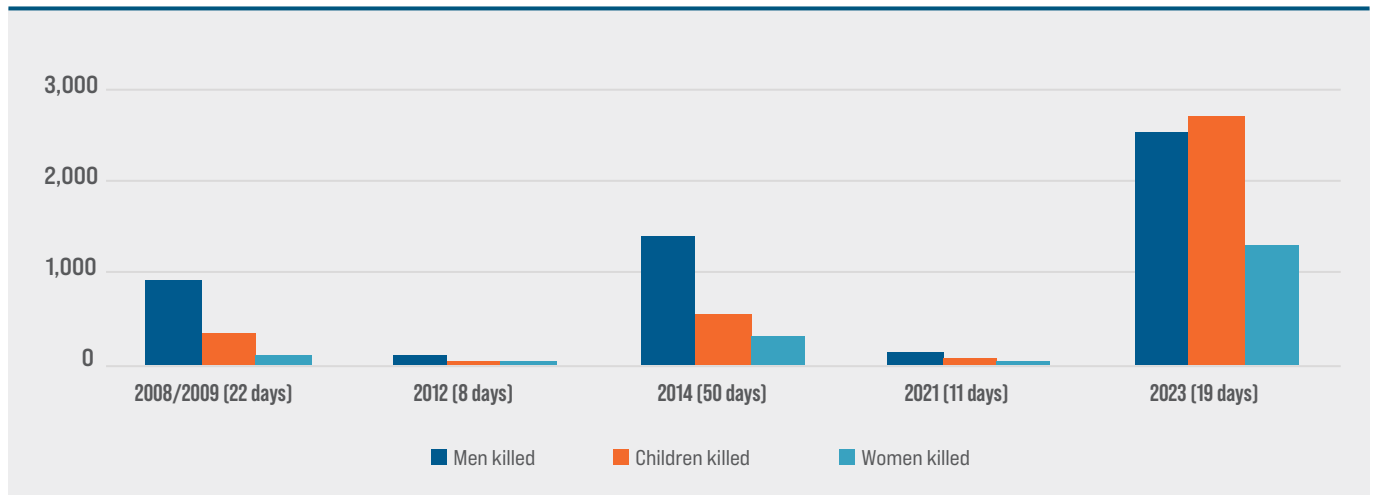


## 2. War on Gaza 2023: mounting violence with each strike of the clock

From 7 to 25 October 2023, 6,547 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, an estimated 68 per cent of whom are women and children.<sup>1</sup> The shocking number of casualties highlights that the current war is unlike any other military escalation since

the start of the blockade. An assessment of casualties from previous hostilities confirms that the military escalations in Gaza are becoming exponentially deadlier over time, as evidenced by the unprecedented violence of the current war (figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Fatalities from major military escalations in Gaza



Source: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) data as of 25 October 2023.

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**6,547**  
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## 3. Persons with disabilities: more vulnerable than ever in wartime

Disability rates in Gaza have increased over the past decade, particularly among males, mainly owing to conflict. For example, the number of persons with disabilities doubled in Gaza between 2007 and 2017, amounting to 65,000 additional persons who are disproportionately affected by deteriorating living conditions owing to the blockade and hostilities.<sup>2</sup> In general, persons with disabilities risk greater exclusion from social participation and access to services. However, the risks are immeasurable in wartime following

<sup>1</sup> OCHA, Flash Update #19 (25 October 2023).

<sup>2</sup> ESCWA estimates based on OCHA, Gaza: people with disabilities disproportionately affected by the energy and salary crisis, 2017.

a prolonged blockade that has rendered services and humanitarian aid virtually non-existent. A rise in the number of persons with disabilities augments the caregiving responsibilities of women and girls within families, and also increases the likelihood of women taking on the role of breadwinner.

**For disabled Gazans, every day is a heroic fight for survival under occupation and blockade. However, during wartime, their lives are worth a bullet.**

## ▶ 4. Female-headed households: heroes with limited support

Prior to the October 2023 war on Gaza, 11 per cent of Gazan households were female-headed, constituting around 46,000 women.<sup>3</sup> However, this number is expected to increase as a result of the current war, with many women becoming “new widows”.<sup>4</sup> ESCWA estimates around 1,816 women were widowed in the first 19 days of the war alone, with numbers expected to rise significantly.<sup>5</sup> The current trend goes well beyond the mournful path of previous escalations: more than 700 Gazan women were widowed in 2014,<sup>6</sup> and about 300 were widowed in 2008–2009.<sup>7</sup>

In previous military escalations, female-headed households reported a higher rate of displacement (88 per cent) than male-headed households (77 per cent), and reported household members with disabilities at double the rate of male-headed households (22 versus 11 per cent). After the 2021 escalation, 73 per cent of female-headed households (compared with 36 per cent of male-headed households) reported a deterioration in mental

health services, while 68 per cent of female-headed households (compared with 58 per cent of male-headed households) reported a deterioration in services for persons with disabilities.<sup>8</sup>

The surge in female-headed households resulting from the current war will exacerbate women’s vulnerability in an already fragile system, which has limited resources to support them. These households will struggle to secure a decent livelihood owing to scarce job opportunities in Gaza. Prior to the current war, the female unemployment rate in Gaza was already 66.2 per cent, vastly exceeding the male unemployment rate of 40.5 per cent,<sup>9</sup> making it the highest female unemployment rate in the Arab region. The vulnerability of children in households with limited resources has a detrimental effect on their educational attainment, especially when coupled with school closures, damage to school infrastructure, and the displacement of teachers and students.



Al Araby/via wikimedia.org

3 PCBS, Conditions of the Palestinian population on the occasion of the World Population Day, 11/07/2023, 2023.

4 United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL), Hostilities in Gaza and Israel: flash appeal for the occupied Palestinian territory (12 October 2023), 2023.

5 ESCWA estimates based on UN-Women, Facts and figures: women and girls during the war in Gaza.

6 OCHA, The Gaza Strip: the long term impact of the 2014 hostilities on women and girls, 2016.

7 Al Mezan, OPT - Cast Lead Aggression 1st anniversary, day 1: 96 widows and 245 orphans, 2009.

8 UN-Women, After the May 2021 Escalation: A Multi-Sectoral Gender Needs Assessment in the Gaza Strip, 2022.

9 PCBS, Labour Force Survey (January–March, 2023) Round (Q2/ 3 202), 2023.



## ▶ 5. Maternal and child health: giving birth amid destruction

Currently, there are around 50,000 pregnant women in Gaza, of whom 5,522 are expected to deliver by November 2023.<sup>10</sup> This number is similar to 2014, when more than 45,000 pregnant women did not have access to basic reproductive health services, and around 5,000 deliveries took place in challenging conditions.<sup>11</sup> In 2016, the maternal mortality rate in Gaza was 15.5 per 100,000 births, increasing to 17 per 100,000 in 2019.<sup>12</sup> As a result of the current war's impact on health service infrastructure, reports by the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate that of the 35 hospitals in Gaza, 12 have been forced out of work.<sup>13</sup>

Pre- and post-natal care has become non-existent as a result of severe destruction and displacement, and of overrun and under-resourced hospitals. Consequently, women in Gaza do not have access to safe and hygienic deliveries or necessary medication. The stress from chronic bombing, violence and displacement could also result in miscarriages or short- and long-term health issues for mothers and babies.

During past escalations in the enclave, maternal and child health was seriously constrained, with profound implications. In the aftermath of the May 2021 escalation, of the 16,500 deliveries that took place,

In Gaza,

**5,522**



**pregnant women are living the unimaginable terror of giving birth imminently amid heavy bombing and wholesale destruction, without medical assistance. Thousands of newborns will open their eyes to an uncertain future; their first breath will fill their lungs with the smell of death and devastation.**

around 2,500 pregnant women experienced a complication, with many requiring emergency caesarean sections.<sup>14</sup> In 2014, the maternity ward of Al Shifa Hospital, Gaza's largest, registered an increased number of miscarriages, premature births, and child mortality rates. The neonatal mortality rate at Al Shifa doubled from 7 to 14 per cent owing to the 2014 conflict.<sup>15</sup> Access to obstetric care was also limited, following the closure of health facilities providing the service.<sup>16</sup> In 2008–2009, there was a spike in miscarriages at the four main hospitals in Gaza, and an uptick in neonatal mortality at Al Shifa Hospital.<sup>17</sup>

## ▶ 6. Violence begets violence

The protracted blockade and other increasingly harmful occupation policies, coupled with the current violent war and full siege of Gaza, will continue to perpetuate devastation and humanitarian crises, with no end in sight.

While all Gazans suffer these brutalities daily, women and children in the enclave continue to be in a severely disadvantaged position compared with other women and children in the Arab region and globally.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Crisis in Palestine: UNFPA Palestine Situation Report #1 (13 October 2023).

<sup>11</sup> OCHA, Occupied Palestinian territory: Gaza emergency situation report (as at 25 July 2014, 1500 hrs), 2014.

<sup>12</sup> UNFPA and others, Status of Implementation of National Commitments in Nairobi ICPD Summit: Palestine, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> WHO, oPT Emergency situation Report, Issue 7 (23 October 2023).

<sup>14</sup> UNFPA, Escalation in Palestine, Situation Report no. 2, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> OCHA, Gaza Initial Rapid Assessment, 27 August 2014, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> OCHA, Occupied Palestinian territory: Gaza emergency situation report (as at 25 July 2014, 1500 hrs), 2014.

<sup>17</sup> WHO, Gaza Strip: Initial health needs assessment - 16 February, 2009, 2009.

As prior hostilities indicate, military escalations and war not only perpetuate a vicious cycle of violence, but also entrench intergenerational harms and drive de-development, resulting in greater social divisions, and normalizing hate speech. Such conditions will never result in peace, and risk exacerbating global divides. There are no winners in this conflict.

**Every day that passes without a ceasefire fuels extremist hate and drives a wider wedge through the international community. There are no winners in this war.**

## ▶ 7. Towards a decent and peaceful future

### A. Women for peace

Women should have seats at the negotiating table and lead the dialogue for peacemaking. Their voices need to be heard to ensure sustained development and true peace within Gaza and the State of Palestine in its entirety. Without women's active participation, the occupation and violence will persist and escalate, resulting in further violent extremism and hate speech, and missed opportunities for a population to thrive and live decently. Women must therefore be at the centre of all peacebuilding processes.

### B. No return to the status quo

Even if the war were to end today, the status quo is not a viable solution for the enclave. The international community should not aim to return Gaza to its status prior to the current war, where Palestinians' basic human rights were flagrantly violated on a daily basis. The international community must facilitate a situation that ensures Palestinians' total freedom of mobility and access to inalienable rights. This should start with a complete ceasefire, and ensure that international law is respected and that all civilians

are protected. Urgent action is needed to secure the endurance of Gazan civilians. Humanitarian aid must flow into Gaza unconditionally, and in strict accordance with international law. This effort should be simultaneously complemented by a robust internationally mediated peace process, which addresses the root causes of the war.

### C. A new path to peace based on a humanitarian-sustained development nexus

It is crucial to pair these immediate interventions with a comprehensive and inclusive sustainable development plan, which should not only prioritize inclusive and sustainable outcomes, but also the specific challenges faced by vulnerable groups and marginalized communities in Gaza. This endeavour should be led by a collaborative partnership between national and international stakeholders, creating an environment conducive to lasting peace in the enclave.

This multi-pronged approach, combining peace negotiations and sustainable development, is the path towards alleviating the suffering of Gazan residents, and laying the foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and hopeful future for all.



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