

One year of hostilities: impact on education in Gaza

About this report

Aim: this report aims to highlight the hostilities' impacts on education in Gaza and the main challenges facing the education system. It will also highlight the secondary impacts of the prolonged lack of education on Gazan students.

Methodology: the analysis is based on the secondary data review of public and nonpublic sources, corroborated by conversations with key stakeholders.

Limitations: most secondary data highlights the situation of school-age children in Gaza more than higher education students. This is because the mandate of the Education Cluster within the humanitarian response system is to focus on mandatory basic schooling (grades one to ten).

OVERVIEW

One year after the escalation of hostilities between Israel and Hamas began, Gaza continues to face devastating effects, with unprecedented loss of life and widespread infrastructure destruction. By 24 September, the hostilities had killed more than 41,495 people and injured 96,006 in Gaza, and an estimated 1.9 million people have been internally displaced (90% of the population) (OCHA 25/09/2024). As of 9 September, around 86% of Gaza remained under Israeli-issued evacuation orders.

The impact of the hostilities has disproportionately affected civilians, especially children. As millions of students around the world start a new academic year, students in Gaza are still grappling with the conflict's impacts, including severe disruptions to their education (AJ 04/09/2024; EAA 13/03/2024). Since 7 October 2023, all schools, universities, and training centres in Gaza have remained closed, and displacement, facility destruction, and access constraints from Israeli military operations have left Gazans without education access (Al Mezan 02/09/2024).

- Fatalities by 24 September 2024 included at least 10,310 students and 410 school teachers (OCHA 25/09/2024).
- Injuries by 24 September included over 19,110 students and 2,460 school teachers (OCHA 25/09/2024).
- The hostilities had displaced at least 19,000 students within Gaza by 9 September (MoE X 09/09/2024).

- Fatalities by 26 September included more than 650 university students and 110 educators (TNH 26/09/2024).
- The figures of deaths, injuries, and displacement are likely much higher than reported, as insecurity and access constraints, including infrastructure destruction, challenge data collection and reporting mechanisms.
- More than 625,000 school-age children in Gaza have gone a full year without formal education (Reuters 21/08/2024).
- An estimated 58,000 children were unable to start first grade for the 2024 academic year (UNICEF 09/09/2024; MoE X 09/09/2024).
- By May, all 12 of Gaza's higher education institutions had been destroyed or damaged, grinding all services to a halt and affecting 90,000 higher education students (Reuters 13/05/2024).
- An August UNICEF report estimated that almost all Gazan children (more than one million) needed mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) (UNICEF 08/08/2024).
- An estimated 17,000 children were unaccompanied or separated by February, and 4,000 children were missing or buried under rubble by June (UNICEF 02/02/2024; STC 24/06/2024). Hostilities and data collection challenges mean that these numbers were likely higher by September 2024.

International humanitarian law grants schools general protection against direct attacks, and attacks on schools are one of six grave violations against children in armed conflict contexts as identified by the UNSC (ECW 02/04/2024; SRS/CAAC accessed 24/09/2024). By 30 March, however, attacks had directly hit or damaged at least 88% of school buildings (477 out of 564) since 7 October 2023 (OCHA 25/09/2024; ECW 02/04/2024; Education Cluster 12/09/2024 and 28/07/2024; UNICEF accessed 24/09/2024). These numbers are based on confirmed damages, which means the figure could be as high as 93% if including likely damaged schools (Education Cluster et al. 10/09/2024). Between November 2023 and July 2024, direct attacks by Israeli armed forces against schools – 60% of which are serving as displacement shelters – have trended upward, with 378 directly hit by September 2024 (UNICEF accessed 24/09/2024; Education Cluster 01/10/2024). Direct attacks on schools have continued, with ten schools hit from 1–23 September (OHCHR 23/09/2024; AJ 21/09/2024). Many schools that were classified as “damaged” in the July analysis from the Education Cluster had been struck again and were classified as “direct hit” by September 2024 (Education Cluster 01/10/2024). The UN, along with independent experts, have accused Israel of the “systematic obliteration” of the Palestinian education system (UN 18/04/2024).

KEY MESSAGES

- The humanitarian crisis in Gaza is unprecedented. As a result, fundamental aspects of childhood have been destroyed, including loss of family and support systems and no opportunities for children to learn, play, or keep a stable routine (KIT 12/09/2024).
- Barely any education infrastructure is left in Gaza. The few remaining schools are serving as shelters for displaced people (CNN 15/09/2024).
- Children are using time typically spent learning to queue for food and water assistance (CNN 15/09/2024).
- Israeli authorities do not consider learning materials humanitarian items and often do not allow their entry into Gaza through border crossings. There is limited to no stationery or other learning supplies available in local markets, and any remaining supplies have become too expensive for people to afford.
- Sustainable education programming and learning outcomes are not possible until there is a lasting ceasefire (UNRWA 25/09/2024; University of Cambridge et al. 25/09/2024). Under the constant threat of attack, parents are afraid to send their children for learning activities in dedicated spaces at displacement sites.
- Humanitarian architecture typically does not prioritise education at the onset of a crisis, even though a lack of learning opportunities for children contributes to other needs, such as for MHPSS and protection (University of Cambridge et al. 25/09/2024).
- The longer children are out of school, the more at risk they are of permanently dropping out and engaging in child labour or early marriage (UN 10/07/2024).
- The protracted lack of education typically results in high unemployment rates, which will have a long-term impact on life in Gaza. Prior to October 2023, 70% of young graduates in Gaza were unemployed. This rate was already among the highest globally (AJ 27/09/2023).

EDUCATION IN GAZA PRIOR TO 7 OCTOBER 2023

Basic and secondary education

The new school year was scheduled to start on 9 September 2024, but more than 625,000 Since the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education has managed the education system in Palestine. The mandatory Palestinian education system includes government schools, private schools, and UNRWA schools.

Before 7 October 2023, the basic and secondary (kindergarten to grade 12) education system in Gaza accommodated 625,000 students and 22,564 teachers in 815 schools across 564 buildings (Anera 28/03/2024). In Palestine, grades one to ten are considered basic education and compulsory for all students (UNICEF 10/2022).

Despite Gaza having high literacy and basic education completion rates, the 16-year Israeli blockade and recurring hostilities have severely weakened the education system, limiting the availability of educational materials, causing extensive facility damage, intermittently disrupting the learning process, and affecting the wellbeing of both students and teachers (UNICEF 10/2022). According to the 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview, nearly 392,700 students needed education assistance across the Gaza Strip prior to 7 October, with Gaza city having the highest number of students in need at 139,958 (OCHA 25/01/2023).

Long-term school closures because of COVID-19 had left 79% of students needing catch-up learning programmes by January 2023 (OCHA 25/01/2023). The loss of learning during COVID-19 lockdowns added pressure on the education system, meaning that students already needed humanitarian education support prior to October 2023. Between 2019–2024, children in Gaza lost at least 14 months of education because of COVID-19 and pre- and post-October 2023 Israeli military operations (University of Cambridge et al. 25/09/2024).

Higher education

Prior to 7 October 2023, roughly 90,000 students were enrolled across 12 universities in Gaza (Reuters 13/05/2024). Despite the challenges of the 16-year Israeli blockade and a lack of employment opportunities, Gazans strive to pursue higher education and perceive it as a means of mobility and financial security, as well as a point of societal pride (Jebril 23/08/2024; TNH 26/09/2024). The increasing impact of the blockade on Gaza's economy and security, however, has made access to higher education difficult, particularly for lower-income families who cannot afford to send their children to universities.

IMPACTS OF THE CONFLICT ON EDUCATION IN GAZA SINCE 7 OCTOBER 2023

Impeded access to primary, secondary, and higher education

The new school year was scheduled to start on 9 September 2024. Unable to return to their primary and secondary schools, more than 625,000 children in Gaza have been without education since 7 October 2023 (Reuters 21/08/2024). An additional 58,000 six-year-olds were unable to start first grade for the current academic year (MoE X 09/09/2024; Reuters 09/09/2024; UNICEF 09/09/2024).

Furthermore, in July 2024, 39,000 students in Gaza could not sit for their grade 12 official exams (Tawjihi) (UNICEF 09/09/2024). This, combined with the destruction of all higher education facilities in Gaza, means that these students are unable to progress to higher education, and a significant portion may never return to school (DCIP 26/06/2024; Education Cluster 03/08/2024). This will severely limit their career opportunities and employability. These consequences extend beyond individuals, where a lack of an educated workforce can further stifle economic growth and perpetuate cycles of poverty and its impacts on households.

Figures of students unable to attend school this year (a total of 659,000) are calculated using baseline information, and unfortunately do not consider students who were killed and those who were able to leave Gaza in the early days of the hostilities.

All 12 of Gaza's higher education institutions have been destroyed or damaged since 7 October, grinding all services to a halt and affecting 90,000 higher education students. In some cases, universities in the West Bank are supporting students, though internet and communication challenges to distance learning and displacement limit this support (Reuters 13/05/2024). Medical students unable to continue their higher education have been volunteering at the front lines to support Gaza's medical system, as healthcare provision is overstretched and under attack by Israeli armed forces (TNH 26/09/2024).

The loss of at least 14 months of education because of COVID-19 and pre- and post-October 2023 Israeli military operations in Gaza has resulted in roughly 20% of children lacking basic reading skills by age ten (University of Cambridge et al. 25/09/2024). The figure is likely higher, as the methodology used to calculate the 'learning poverty' rate did not account for the greater impacts of the hostilities on education.

Hostilities' impacts on teachers

The hostilities have mentally and physically affected teachers and educators in Gaza, with many having experienced displacement and the loss of loved ones. By 24 September, 410 education staff had been killed and 2,460 were injured in Gaza (OCHA 25/09/2024).

Many teachers are also likely to be involved in frontline activities, such as supporting the recovery of bodies from attack sites. Despite the passion and commitment of academic staff and teachers to contribute to children's learning opportunities, the context of Gaza and its stressors have affected their ability to engage meaningfully with learning activities, and students and are likely to face long-lasting impacts (University of Cambridge et al. 25/09/2024).

Damage or destruction of educational infrastructure

Gazan educational infrastructure – including schools, colleges, and universities – have been severely bombarded, with at least 93% of school buildings either damaged or destroyed by 10 September (Education Cluster et al. 10/09/2024). 85% of schools require significant repair or reconstruction before being functional again (UNICEF 09/09/2024; Education Cluster et al. 10/09/2024). According to a July 2024 satellite analysis by the Education Cluster, the hardest-hit governorate was North Gaza, with 98% of its school buildings either directly struck or damaged (where damage occurred within school premises but not directly on a building). Gaza governorate was similarly affected, with 93% of its school buildings affected, while 72% of school buildings in Khan Younis governorate sustained direct hits (Education Cluster 28/07/2024).

The damage or destruction of a single school often disrupts the education of two cohorts of students, since 61% schools in Gaza use a double-shift system. This system assigns separate morning and afternoon groups sharing facilities because of already limited education infrastructure and a high population density (Anera 28/03/2024; Education Cluster 28/07/2024; The Guardian 18/12/2023). 70% of UNRWA schools and all private schools operated on a double-shift system (Education Cluster 01/10/2024).

Unaffected schools are serving as temporary shelters for displaced people. Because of fuel and gas shortages, displaced people have resorted to using school equipment, including desks and books, as fuel to make fires. This will likely increase the burden of reconstruction and rehabilitation in case of a sustained ceasefire (The Guardian 18/12/2023).

According to educators and aid organisations, the restoration of normalcy in Gaza will be a lengthy process because of the extensive damage inflicted, even with a long-term ceasefire (The Guardian 18/12/2023).

Prior to 7 October 2023, Israel already restricted the entry of dual-use items – civilian items that could have military uses, such as many construction materials – into Gaza. This impeded the repair and rehabilitation of infrastructure affected by the recurrent escalation of hostilities, and necessary reconstruction efforts for affected infrastructure, including schools, were often left incomplete (OCHA 25/01/2023; Reach Education Fund 14/01/2022). These restrictions, which are still in place, are likely to greatly impede the repairs of infrastructure destroyed since 7 October.

For further information on restrictions on dual-use items, please read the ACAPS analysis on the political economy of Gaza.

The current level of infrastructure damage and destruction compounds existing infrastructure damage from even before 7 October. Israeli attacks on schools are frequent in Palestine, with the use of both air-launched and ground-launched explosive weapons a common occurrence during outbreaks of conflict (UNICEF 10/08/2019). Between January–June 2023, the Education Cluster documented 423 education-related incidents, defined as “any threatened or actual use of force against students, teachers, academics, education support and transport staff, education officials, education buildings, resources, or facilities (including school buses) perpetrated by armed forces, law enforcement, state security entities, and non-state armed groups” (OCHA/UN RC/HC oPt 21/08/2023; GCPEA/Education Cluster 17/04/2022). These incidents affected around 50,000 children across Palestine, including the West Bank and East Jerusalem (OCHA/UN RC/HC oPt 21/08/2023; Education Cluster 05/09/2023; Reuters 07/10/2023). The number of education-related incidents in 2023 for Gaza alone is not publicly available.

Further reduced access to schools for children with disabilities

Since 7 October 2023, educational barriers for children with disabilities have only increased. The number of children with disabilities has likely risen in Gaza considering the level of conflict-related injuries, with more than 1,000 children estimated to have had one or both legs amputated (KIT 12/09/2024). Access to learning activities is expected to be even more constrained, as children are unable to move freely through damaged and destroyed infrastructure and terrain. Prior to 7 October, poor school infrastructure from years of hostilities had already made access to education particularly difficult for children with disabilities, who represented 2% of the student population (OCHA 25/01/2023).

Vastly reduced sense of safety for children accessing available learning activities

By 9 September 2024, Israel had issued new evacuation orders for people sheltering in North Gaza to leave their homes (Reuters 09/09/2024). People in Gaza have received multiple evacuation orders in different areas of the enclave since 7 October 2023, with the majority of the population experiencing repeated displacement. The experience of repeated displacement has significantly increased emotional distress in children, affecting their sense of safety (KIT 12/09/2024). Related stressors can be expected to affect many children’s ability to learn.

As a result of repeated displacement and the constant risk of attacks on shelters, there is a lack of safe spaces for education responders to establish temporary learning hubs for children (UNICEF 09/09/2024; KIT 12/09/2024). Given the frequency of attacks on Gaza, caregivers are also afraid to send their children to any learning activities being provided.

UN mine action experts have warned that even when the current hostilities end, the risk from unexploded weapons remains lethally high for civilians in Gaza (UN 06/05/2024; Arab Center DC 17/07/2024). The extensive use of bombs since 7 October has increased civilians’ risk of death and injury from explosive remnants of war (ERW). Because of their curious inclinations, children are particularly exposed to fatality risks from ERW. ERW presence had already affected school-age children before 7 October. Between May 2021 and December 2022, children made up 79% of reported ERW victims (OCHA 25/01/2023). From 2014–2021, UNMAS removed nearly 8,800 ERW in Gaza, with unexploded ordnance also discovered near schools (GCPEA/Education Cluster 17/04/2022; HI 14/02/2023).

Destruction and shortage of education materials

There is a severe shortage of equipment and teaching materials in Gaza, as some have been destroyed alongside schools, while others have been repurposed to create fires for displaced people seeking shelter in abandoned facilities (The Guardian 18/12/2023). Little to no learning supplies are left in the local markets, and the prices of any existing materials have soared. The Israeli authorities do not consider educational and recreational supplies humanitarian items, impeding the delivery of new learning supplies in humanitarian convoys coming into Gaza through Israeli checkpoints.

SECONDARY IMPACTS OF PROLONGED LACK OF ACCESS TO LEARNING

The disruption to education, including previous educational losses from COVID-19 and past conflicts, will have long-lasting consequences for Gazan students' futures, adding to the trauma and loss that the hostilities have already inflicted.

Increased exposure to protection risks

In the absence of learning opportunities, children are supporting their families by generating income or seeking assistance, including queuing for food and water assistance (CNN 15/09/2024). Doing so during the bombardment of Gaza exposes children to the risk of death, injury, or separation from their caregivers.

The loss of access to schools, which serves as a protective environment, has increased children's exposure to exploitation and consequent trauma, endangering their physical and mental wellbeing. The longer children are out of school, the more difficult it becomes for them to catch up on their education, and the more likely it is for them to face the risk of exploitation, including child labour and child marriage (UN 10/07/2024).

Prior to October 2023, economic strains on households resulted in 7% of children in Gaza engaging in child labour, with a rate of 12% in North Gaza (UNICEF 20/04/2021). The majority of households with children engaged in labour live below the poverty line, cannot afford education, and require additional support for household income (OCHA 14/05/2019). The Israeli hostilities since October 2023 have aggravated the economic burden on households, which could lead to a higher incidence of children engaging in labour for survival (University of Cambridge et al. 25/09/2024).

Schools typically act as important entry points for child protection systems, where teachers notice students who do not seem mentally or physically healthy. Typically, teachers would support these students and refer those who did not know where to seek support to child protection services. The loss of schools and the hostilities' impacts on teachers' mental and physical wellbeing mean that students have lost access to a vital protection system.

Heightened MHPSS needs

The current lack of schooling puts young children at risk of developmental delays and damage to their cognitive, social, and emotional development (UNICEF 09/09/2024). With almost all of Gaza's children (1.2 million) suffering mental distress, there is a critical need for education to resume, with the inclusion of trauma-informed psychosocial support in future school

curriculums to support children's recovery (The Guardian 18/12/2023; UiT/NRC 18/07/2024). For older students, the disruption to their academics has contributed to increased uncertainty and anxiety (UNICEF 09/09/2024). Continual shock and trauma have affected students' outlook on the future and the world, with children questioning the values of equality, tolerance, and human rights when taught about them in school (University of Cambridge et al. 25/09/2024). The longer the hostilities last and children face extreme stressors, the more challenging it will be for them to recover and live physically and mentally healthy lives (KIT 12/09/2024).

Prior to 7 October 2023, children were already facing psychosocial distress because of recurrent hostilities, but according to the 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview, the provision of school-based psychosocial support was already a challenge even then (OCHA 25/01/2023).

For further information on the pre- and post-7 October MHPSS drivers and needs of people in Gaza, please read the ACAPS analysis on the impact of the conflict on MHPSS needs in Gaza.

Increased vulnerability to food insecurity and malnutrition

Currently, there is no data available on the nutritional status of children above five years old. The lack of schooling affects students' access to food, which can be expected to deteriorate their nutritional status. The disruption of school feeding programmes since 7 October 2023 has also left millions of children without consistent access to nutritious meals (Buheji/Buheji 23/01/2024; WFP 02/08/2024).

Combined with protection risks that are likely to occur in the absence of education, such as early marriage, gender-based violence, and adolescent pregnancies, students are expected to experience long-term negative nutritional outcomes and increased gender disparities (Vahedi et al. 16/02/2023).

Poor nutritional status will also have long-term consequences on education, as it affects children's cognitive and physical development, and they can be expected to need extra support for learning in the future (University of Cambridge et al. 25/09/2024; Roberts et al. 26/01/2022).

Please read the ACAPS analysis on the impact of hostilities on children in Gaza for further information on other needs that children uniquely experience, including malnutrition.

Increased long-term adolescent unemployment rates

Delayed or absent education worsens the long-term socioeconomic impacts of the hostilities in Gaza, where students are likely to face increased unemployment and lower economic growth (University of Cambridge et al. 25/09/2024). Prior to October 2023, youth unemployment in Gaza was already among the highest in the world at 70%. In September 2023, an estimated 200,000 graduates ages 19–29 were unemployed (AJ 27/09/2023).

EDUCATION RESPONSE CAPACITY

Education continues to be underfunded in humanitarian appeals, with at least a 78.2% funding gap for education programming by 15 September 2024 and an UNRWA analysis finding only 3.5% of aid benefitting education in Gaza (Education Cluster accessed 24/09/2024; University of Cambridge et al. 25/09/2024).

Currently, all education-related humanitarian programming is labelled ‘learning activities’, as it does not meet the needs for basic education. Despite 60 humanitarian responders providing educational programming in Gaza, recreational activities and psychosocial support have been the main educational programming available. Humanitarian organisations have established temporary learning centres and programmes; by 9 September, UNICEF and other responders had established 39 temporary learning spaces offering recreational activities, emergency learning kits, and MHPSS services to more than 12,400 students, youth, caregivers, and teachers in Gaza (UNICEF 09/09/2024; Anera 28/03/2024). In August, to support children’s mental health and psychosocial needs, UNRWA established a back-to-learning programme designed to provide games, drama, arts, music, and sports activities for children across 45 shelters (Reuters 09/09/2024).

Significant gaps remain in the provision of recreational materials and MHPSS kits, the establishment of temporary learning spaces and learning support sessions, and the provision of support for distance learning. These gaps are a result of insecurity, a lack of funding, the low availability of educational materials, and a lack of access to safe spaces to deliver learning activities. Insecurity-related physical impediments, as well as bureaucratic impediments – such as Israeli restrictions on dual-use items entering Gaza and learning supplies not being considered humanitarian items – are responsible for these barriers.

On 5 September, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education introduced an e-learning programme intended to enrol students in Gaza. A lack of electricity, internet connectivity, and digital devices is likely to limit its coverage. The displacement of approximately 85% of the population, the destruction of essential infrastructure, and the use of schools as shelters only worsen the situation (MEMO 06/09/2024).