

Position Paper

on the Reality of Persons with Disabilities
in the Gaza Strip Amid the Israeli Military
Aggression



Introduction

Following the October 7th attack by Hamas on Israel, the Israeli government declared war on the Palestinian people, leading to a full-scale naval, aerial and ground invasion of the Gaza Strip, an area of 365 square km where 2.3 million live in one of the world's most densely populated areas. Fueled by fury and vengeance, the Israeli government cut off food, water, electricity and fuel to the strip and launched an indiscriminate bombardment of Gaza in what can only be explained as collective punishment of the entire population creating an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in violation of International Humanitarian Law. In 88 days so far, an unprecedented 29,000 munitions have been dropped on Gaza leading to the killing of 22,297 Palestinians, over 70% of which are women and children, the wounding of 61,519, the displacement of nearly 1.9 million people, 80% of the population, and thousands still missing under the rubble of the bombed-out buildings assumed dead.¹ No one and nothing have been spared from the indiscriminate and systematic destruction including hospitals, schools, wastewater infrastructure, mosques, churches, water desalination facilities, historical buildings and residential buildings. Should people survive the onslaught, they face starvation from the shortage of food or risk contracting endemic diseases from the severe overcrowding without proper public and private sanitation. This indicates a clear policy of rendering the Gaza Strip unsuitable for human habitation and displacing the population from the region.

The worsening of the Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza disproportionately effects People with Disabilities who are increasingly more vulnerable under such extreme onslaught and living conditions. Despite the scarcity of any statistics on the number of PwDs among the displaced population, it is safe to assume that at least 15% of those displaced individuals are PwDs.² The direct targeting of hospitals and healthcare centers, along with the absence of safe corridors, has resulted in a loss of access to medical care, shortages of medications and assistive devices, and an increase in psychological trauma. Furthermore, the spread of violence and the lack of security contribute to heightened tension and anxiety among individuals with

¹ الجهاز المركزي للإحصاء الفلسطيني. Available at: <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/>

² 2023, 20 November (2023) *Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel: Flash update #45 [en/ar/he]*, Front page. Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-45> (Accessed: 18 December 2023).

disabilities, leading to insufficient mental health services and exacerbating the psychological burden on this vulnerable group.

It is important to note that International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) have established legal mechanisms to protect persons with disabilities during times of war, as Article 11 of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ICRPD) states that "States Parties, in accordance with their obligations under international law, including humanitarian law and human rights law, shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies, and natural disasters."³ In this context, the Israeli Army, both as an army and as an occupying force, has disregarded all international laws and conventions, exacerbating the crises in the region, particularly for persons with disabilities.

The large number of Palestinian casualties includes individuals with severe injuries, many of which will result in long-term disabilities. During this aggression on Gaza, 17% of the total injuries were attributed to children,⁴ which means that the number of children whose injuries are going to cause a disability is going to be high. Additionally, the massive displacement process under airstrikes and artillery fire puts the lives of many people with disabilities and injured people at risk, as many of them were martyred on the way through the so-called "safe corridors" due to their exacerbated vulnerabilities which makes the process harder and slower. In addition, many of them had to walk long distances without having their assistive devices or suitable transportation. The situation highlights the intersection of the challenges faced by persons with disabilities and the harsh conditions they live in the conflict, emphasizing the need for humanitarian interventions that specifically address their unique requirements for PwDs.

Persons with Disabilities in Palestine: Between Obstacles and Airstrikes

PwDs are usually one of the most affected groups by the deliberate and intense strikes targeting the population in the Gaza Strip. Trying to evacuate any building in Gaza is a struggle, but it is exacerbated for PwDs as it is reported that families of PwDs stress about evacuating even before they are bombed

³ 106/61، نيويورك. A/RES. الأمم المتحدة (2006). اتفاقية حقوق الأشخاص ذوي الإعاقة،

⁴ الإحصاء الفلسطيني يصدر بياناً صحفياً بمناسبة اليوم العالمي للأفراد ذوي الإعاقة 2023/12/03، الجهاز المركزي للإحصاء الفلسطيني (2023) <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/postar.aspx?tabID=512&lang=ar&ItemID=4647&mid=3915&wversion=Staging>

because they know it is inevitable.⁵ As for PwDs themselves, individuals with Movement disabilities may find it challenging to evacuate quickly -if at all-, while those with visual impairments may face difficulties due to the changes in the familiar environment. Similarly, individuals with hearing impairments may struggle to be aware of the ongoing airstrikes in their surroundings. Moreover, the prolonged and intense airstrikes in Gaza have forced many PwDs to leave their homes without their assistive devices or necessary medications, exacerbating their already dire situation.

Persons with Disabilities in Shelter Centers and Without Shelter:

As a result of the intense airstrikes and direct targeting of residential buildings, healthcare facilities, and infrastructure continue in the Gaza Strip, approximately 1.7 million people have been forced to evacuate and seek refuge in shelter centers, tents, or hospitals. It is noteworthy that these centers exceed their capacity, and lack the essential requirements for living. As PwDs make up approximately 15% of the total displaced population in shelter centers, these facilities are usually not built in an accessible manner for them.⁶

Despite the loss of basic equipment in Gaza's "shelter centers," they have not been safe from the intense airstrikes and massacres, as seen in Al-Fakhura School massacre, where thousands of displaced individuals have been killed due to the Israeli attacks on the school. Another devastating incident occurred at the Tal Al-Za'atar School, operated by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), where tens of people lost their lives and many were injured.⁷

⁵ (غزة: أثر مدمر للهجمات والحصار من جانب إسرائيل على الأشخاص ذوي الإعاقة 2023) <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2023/11/01/gaza-israeli-attacks-blockade-devastating-people-disabilities>

⁶ 2023, 20 November (2023) *Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel: Flash update #45 [en/ar/he]*, Front page. Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-45> (Accessed: 18 December 2023).

⁷ المرصد الأورومتوسطي لحقوق الإنسان (2023). إسرائيل تصعد استهداف مدارس تأوي النازحين في إطار جريمة الإبادة الجماعية في غزة، تم الاطلاع عليه في 2023/12/6م (نسخة إلكترونية)، رابط الموقع: <http://euromedmonitor.org/a/6006>

The dire situation requires the urgency of an immediate ceasefire, and acknowledging and addressing the special requirements for PwDs in shelter centers, ensuring that these facilities are equipped to provide appropriate support and care during times of conflict and displacement. The targeting of civilian infrastructure, including shelter centers, raises concerns about the violation of international humanitarian law and the need for accountability for such actions.

Based on the aforementioned, the EJ-YMCA acknowledges the imminent danger posed by this war and its impact on individuals with disabilities in Palestine in general, and Gaza in particular. Therefore, we call for:

1. An immediate Ceasefire and Opening Humanitarian Corridors

Urgent, immediate, and definitive ceasefire and the opening of humanitarian corridors are essential to allow civilians, including individuals with disabilities, to move and access safer locations.

2. Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction

Urgent international intervention is required to provide humanitarian aid and rebuild infrastructure in a manner that accommodates the requirements of persons with disabilities. This includes ensuring that persons with disabilities have access to basic services, such as clean drinking water, medical care, rehabilitation, and psychosocial support.

3. Supply of Medical Equipment and Assistive Devices

There is an urgent need to supply necessary medical equipment and assistive devices to individuals with disabilities in Gaza. Rehabilitation teams should be deployed across all areas of the region.

4. International Accountability

The international community must hold the Israeli government accountable for the impact of the war on civilians, with a focus on persons with disabilities; This involves investigating human rights violations, holding perpetrators accountable, and ensuring the delivery of humanitarian aid to the population.