

# Children of Gaza: What it is Like to Live in a Never-ending Climate of Fear

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*Fifteen years of siege, blockade and repeated military operations has created a perpetual state of fear, worry, sadness and grief among Gaza’s children. This is the assessment of Save The Children International. In “Trapped”, a 32-page report issued a week ago, the organisation reported that, since 2018, “the psychosocial well being of children, young people and their caregivers has declined dramatically to alarming levels”.*

The number of children who said they felt fearful increased from 50 to 84 per cent, nervous from 55 to 80 per cent, sad or depressed from 62 to 77 per cent, and grieving from 55 to 78 per cent and “more than half of Gaza’s children have contemplated suicide and three out of five are self-harming”.

Children account for 47 per cent of Gaza’s population of two million, “with over 800,000 having never known life without the blockade”.

While many of Gaza’s two million Palestinians had hoped that their situation would improve after Israel withdrew its troops and colonists from the strip in 2005, this did not happen as Israel maintained and even tightened its air, land and sea control. Conditions went from bad to worse in 2007 when Hamas took over and expelled the Palestinian Authority security services.

Since then, Save the Children lists five violent Israeli attacks experienced by Gaza’s children along with COVID and Israel’s “life-limiting land, air and sea blockade”.

While focusing on Gaza’s children, the organisation only gave a passing reference to their “caregivers”: parents, grandparents and extended family. As I have been closely acquainted with Gaza for many years, I will add my observations. Adults suffer the same anxieties, terrors, depression and pressures harming and depressing children. All Gazans live in a never-ending climate of fear. Constant overflights by Israeli spy and armed drones and

balloons and threats by armed troops deployed along the border fence are constant reminders of Israel's vindictive presence. In the aftermath of Israeli military offensives against Gaza, the percentage of Gazan residents afflicted with PTSD — Post Traumatic Stress Disorder — rises to 99 per cent, according to the late Ayad Sarraj, founder of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme.

Gazans also suffer from daily electricity cuts and a shortage of potable water while Israel restricts the import of cement and other building materials to reconstruct the 1,700 homes, businesses, manufacturing plants and public buildings partially destroyed or destroyed and the 22,000 units damaged in Israel's devastating May 2021 offensive against Gaza which killed at least 161, wounded 2,200 and displaced 113,000.

More than a year after this assault, only 20 per cent of the levelled homes have been rebuilt and 70 per cent of partially damaged homes have been repaired. No efforts have been made to reconstruct the four high rise buildings Israel brought down. While Egypt and Qatar pledged \$1 billion for reconstruction the process has been slow, and thousands of Gazans continue to live with families or in temporary rented accommodation. Conditions are often crowded.

In addition to the wreckage inflicted by the 2021 Israeli onslaught, there are 1,300 severely damaged housing units and 70,000 with some damage from Israel's 2014 attack which remain without funding.

Deprivation of housing plus uncertainty over cuts in electricity and water supplies adds to the suffering of Gazan families. Children, in particular, feel unsafe in a constantly threatening environment which can create frictions within families living in a place regarded as "an open prison".

This aspect was addressed by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in another report on the closure anniversary. Israel's policy, adopted in 2007, "has devastated the economy in Gaza, contributed to fragmentation of the Palestinian people, and forms part of [the] Israeli authorities' crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution against millions of Palestinians".

Israel's policy of refusing Palestinians the right to travel from the Erez terminal in northern Gaza through Israel to the occupied West Bank or Jordan severely restricts Palestinian movement within Palestine or abroad. Israel also bans the operations of a seaport and airport in Gaza and restricts the entry and exit of goods into Gaza.

HRW writes: Israel "blocks most Gaza residents from going to the West Bank, preventing professionals, artists, athletes, students and others from pursuing opportunities within Palestine and from traveling abroad via Israel, restricting their rights to work and an education".

Also among those prevented from traveling to the West Bank are medical staff seeking training on equipment and devices, educators attending seminars, sportsmen and women, painters and poets.

Palestinians must apply for permits to make the 104 kilometre journey from Gaza to the West Bank and may have to wait weeks if not months to receive a reply, if a reply is forthcoming.

Before 2006, Gazans were granted temporary permits but since they they have been denied legal residency in the West Bank. HRW has garnered evidence that “suggests the main motivation is to control Palestinian demography across the West Bank ... land Israel seeks to retain, in contrast to the Gaza Strip”.

To compound Gaza’s isolation. Egypt has restricted Palestinian exit and entry at its crossing at the divided town of Rafah at the southern end of the strip. Restrictions have been eased somewhat in recent months.

Omar Shakir, Israel and Palestine director at HRW, said that instead of emerging from COVID along with the rest of the world, Gazans “remain under what amounts to a 15-year-old lockdown.”

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