

A photograph of a woman standing in a rubble-strewn street in Gaza, with a damaged brick building in the background. The woman is wearing a dark blue t-shirt and dark pants, and is holding a long black pole. The background shows a brick building with a large hole in its wall, and the ground is covered in debris and rubble. The sky is overcast and grey.

Position Paper (1)

A War Without Human Rights

Protecting Persons with Disabilities in Light of the Ethnic Cleansing War on the Gaza Strip

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The Cover photo taken from Latest Story website

A War Without Human Rights

Protecting Persons with Disabilities in Light of the Ethnic Cleansing War on the Gaza Strip

The war of destruction and killing that the Israeli Occupation has been waging for 46 days against the Gaza Strip and against all Palestinians residing in the Strip, which has been under siege for a little less than 17 years, has been escalating. This war has resulted in wide-scale destruction of civil facilities and infrastructure and in the martyrdom of a huge number of civil male and female Palestinians, which can be described as the deliberate efforts by the occupation forces in making the Strip “unlivable” now and in the future. Senior UN officials, rapporteurs of various UN committees, and senior human rights experts have described what is happening as war crimes aimed at ethnic cleansing, which may amount to crimes against humanity.

The reality all over the Gaza Strip is catastrophic on many levels, there is in fact a humanitarian disaster created by an unrestrained army, who does not have the slightest moral or humanitarian restraints. This army is using the deadliest and most destructive types of force with the aim of inflicting the highest possible numbers of losses among Palestinian civilians, in line with its goals as an occupation force that has been seeking to erase the indigenous population and control the land for more than 75 years. As of 22/11/2023, the number of martyrs reached 14,757 martyrs, including 6,000 children and 4,000 women, while the recorded number of wounded individuals reached 37,850, including 6,168 male and female children, while the number of missing persons reached 7,000 individuals, including 4,700 children and women.¹

At first glance, these numbers appear to be shocking and horrifying and reveal the fact that this aggression is being implemented without the slightest regard for international law and international humanitarian law, in front of the whole world and the international community, and without a sincere desire on the part of the world so far to prevent the occupation from committing its ongoing crimes, which aim to ethnically cleanse the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

A recent report shows that around 60% of residential units and buildings in the Gaza Strip have been fully or partially destroyed², and become uninhabitable. More than half of the buildings in the Gaza Strip are

¹ “Occupation’s Aggression on Palestine since 07/10/2023,” *The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics*: (22/11/2023). Website: <https://n9.cl/0flao>.

² “13 Thousand Casualties in the Israeli Air Strikes on Gaza ... Destruction of 60% of Buildings”. *The Middle East*. (20/11/2023). Website: <https://n9.cl/p4yh5>.

inhabitable. Furthermore, public buildings and governmental facilities have been bombed; including public schools and UNRWA schools that are used as shelters in the event of war, which has made all the areas, lands, and facilities of the Gaza Strip unsafe.

The siege currently imposed on the Gaza Strip – which is an intensification of the direct siege that has been going on for nearly 17 years on the Gaza Strip – has threatened and continues to threaten many residents of the Gaza Strip with the risk of death as a result of hunger, dehydration, disease, and malnutrition, or even as a result of complications from multiple injuries. According to the World Food Program in The United Nations, the food that entered the Strip constitutes only 7% of the Strip's food needs since the start of the aggression until November 17th. Furthermore, it confirmed that 2.2 million people in the Gaza Strip are in need of food aid, that is, almost the entire population³. What complexes the disaster is that 65% of primary health care facilities as well as 69% of hospitals in the Gaza Strip are out of service⁴, either due to a lack of fuel as a result of the siege or due to the direct assault and bombing of these health facilities by the occupation.

These numbers only reflect a small part of the truth on the round, as the scale of the tragedies, disasters, and misfortunes that the Palestinians suffer is too great to be written in a paper like this.

This Position Paper aims to present some data and statistics from the field and from reports issued by different official and non-official bodies regarding the double suffering of persons with disabilities, for whom previous brutal wars by the Occupation contributed to causing injuries that led to disability for many of them, in addition to deliberately causing a large increase in the number of persons with disabilities by thousands of Palestinians after they were exposed to various injuries as a result of the devastating bombing of safe homes and hospitals, causing many injuries specifically the amputation of limbs. Initial data indicate that most of these injured are children, and who are often victims of the wars waged against the Gaza Strip.

This Paper seeks to shed light on the suffering of persons with disabilities in times of war, in a manner that contributes to building current solutions or solutions for after the end of the war to lessen their suffering. This Paper contributes to showing that the costs of war on their lives will continue for many decades. Their lives will never be the same again.

³ "World Food Program: Residents of The Gaza Strip are at Risk of Starvation", Aljazeera (17/11/2023). Website: <https://n9.cl/rky36>.

⁴ "The Health Sector in Gaza is Collapsing and the World Health Organization Stresses the Importance of Fuel", The United Nations (17/11/2023). Website: <https://n9.cl/2urvq>.

People with Disability from Suffering to Constant Suffering

In its justification narrative regarding its bloody aggression against the Gaza Strip, the Israeli occupation dehumanized the Palestinians by using descriptions that we do not even dare to write, and we find it necessary to point out this narrative in the context of dealing with the reality and conditions of a social group that already suffers from discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion even before there was any war. This means that their suffering during this war is beyond the capacity of description and digression.

Data from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics indicate the displacement of about 1.65 million Palestinians, while data from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) indicate the displacement of about 1.7 million Palestinians (that is, approximately 80% of the total population of the Strip)⁵.

With the displacement of 80% of the residents of the Gaza Strip, and according to a report published in 2019 which indicated that the number of persons with disability in the Gaza Strip has reached around 47 thousand persons with disability⁶, we can estimate that the number of persons with disability that were displaced has reached almost the same percentage, with a total of 37600 persons, they all have taken refuge to UNRWA shelters, public schools, as well as the homes of relatives and others. This massive displacement of most persons with a disability did not come without major negative effects, represented by the loss of suitable homes for them, mostly leaving behind their medications and assistive devices, and even their treatments, rehabilitation services, and important medical follow-ups of their health due to the siege and destruction of hospitals.

Persons with disability in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have suffered from extremely difficult conditions as a result of occupation practices, social and economic exclusion, and government policies that did not respond to their demands, as the percentage of those who did not enroll in the education process reached more than a third of persons with disabilities aged 15 years and over, or 37.6%. If we add to this percentage those who have enrolled in the education process and then dropped out, which is around 33.8%, then the total percentage of persons with disabilities who did not continue their education will become 71.4%, while among persons with disabilities this percentage reaches 37%, and their participation in the labor market has not exceeded 24%

⁵ "UNRWA Report number 36 on the Conditions in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank", UNRWA (11/22/2023). Website: <https://www.unrwa.org/ar>.

⁶ "A Report on the Numbers of Persons with Disabilities in The Gaza Strip", *The Media Portal for Palestinian NGOs* (29/7/2019). Website: <https://n9.cl/pqvnp>.

among the total males with disability and 4% from the total females with disabilities⁷, this means that those most affected by any crisis are persons with disabilities, but women with disabilities are doubly exposed to violence and exclusion, as they are exposed to complex violence and discrimination based on gender and disability, let alone a war described as a humanitarian, environmental, social and economic disaster that struck the Gaza Strip with all its citizens.

Difficult Conditions for Persons with Disabilities

This position paper presents some data that the Social and Economic Policies Monitor (AlMarsad) and the Stars of Hope Society for the Empowerment of Women with Disabilities have collected through a special monitoring operation that aimed at monitoring the effects of the war and the aggression on persons with disabilities in Gaza Strip. We have attempted to contact 100 male and female participants and were successful in reaching 36 participants. This is due to the disconnection of telecommunication services and internet connection, the displacement of residents, and the difficult and stressful life conditions inside shelters⁸. The data that we have collected and analyzed so far indicates the following:

- A percentage of 77.8% of the participants who were reached are persons with disabilities have been displaced from their homes, and some of them were displaced more than once, while the number of times some individuals were displaced reached 6 times.
- A percentage of 19.4% have completely lost their homes due to the total destruction of houses.
- A percentage of 27.8% had their houses partially destroyed due to Israeli airstrikes.

These percentages reflect the erosion of the basic components of the lives of persons with disabilities, and their long-term and huge effect on them in the future, even if the war ends now. This is all in addition to the health effects that are the result of the lack of the ability to access medicine, treatments, food, and drinking water, as the research participants have responded that their needs revolve around the need for food and medicine, which indicated the seriousness of their health condition.

Furthermore, their findings indicate that accommodations made for persons with disabilities were destroyed, based on the high rates of displacements, in addition to the high rates of fully and partially destroyed houses.

⁷ Ola Awad, "Conditions of Palestinian women on the eve of International Women's Day", *The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics* (05/03/2020). Website: <https://n9.cl/g1m0q>.

⁸ A separate position paper will be issued later on the reality of persons with disabilities in these circumstances.

Many research participants have confirmed that they have lost their home accommodations and/or their support equipment, along with the massive destruction of infrastructure, which poses a double danger to persons with disabilities represented by their inability to move and evacuate easily, especially if a number of their family members who provide them with support are killed or injured.

Some of the few media reports that touched on the reality of persons with disability during the latest aggression indicated that some persons with disabilities reported facing doubled difficulty in the ability to evacuate due to the disconnection of electricity and internet services, which made it difficult to access information that helps them in identifying location and time and to commute with the minimum level of safety⁹. Moreover, the Independent Arabia newspaper monitored the displacement journey of a girl with a mobility disability for a distance of 29 kilometers in her wheelchair, she used her hands to move across the destroyed roads, which gave her cramps in her hands.¹⁰

The continuous suffering of persons with disabilities in trying to secure their nutritional needs as a result of the extremely stressful conditions under which they live and the lack of the components of inclusion is evident in the large number of persons with disability who have moved to shelters that received a high number of individuals that highly exceeds the capacity of these shelters. According to UNRWA, the average number of displaced persons per shelter exceeds 9,000 displaced persons¹¹. "We wait in long lines to get bread, which is very limited, sometimes we stand in line and cannot get any bread because it was sold out". UNRWA also indicates that a person needs to stand between 4-6 hours in line to get bread. There is an additional difficulty in accessing aid due to the lack of any special arrangements for persons with disabilities:

"Persons with disabilities in general, and persons with visual impairments specifically, face much higher difficulties when standing in lines to obtain water and food in shelters. In many cases, crushes occur, resulting in their inability to access aid".¹²

The documentation of the forms of suffering faced by persons with disabilities as a special part of the suffering of the general Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip as the result of the aggressive war is not limited to the

9 "Gaza: Israeli Attacks, Blockade Devastating for People with Disabilities," Human Rights Watch (1/11/2023). Website: <https://n9.cl/qwhwx>.

10 "How Persons with Disability Live in Light of the War on Gaza?" Independent Arabia (23/11/2023). Website: <https://n9.cl/ohj4u>

11 "UNRWA Situation Report 37 on the Situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem," UNRWA (23/11/2023) Website: <https://n9.cl/nvkei>.

12 Previous resource. Interview Date: 15/11/2023.

ability to access food and medicine, but the most important thing remains to be able to preserve the lives of persons with disabilities and their families, as we see:

“I am in the north (of The Gaza Strip) and was unable to leave my home, I have at least 4 injured people at home, one of which was martyred due to continued bleeding without the ability to get the needed treatment. Two of my family members are persons with disabilities and I cannot move them, and there are at least 20 people in the house in the north who are unable to leave. There is no water, food, or electricity, and there is no information about public hospitals. We have now left the house and settled in a house which we do not know who its owners are, and the house is 20 meters away from the tanks’ location.”¹³

The picture that we see from interviewing a person with a disability, who works as a director for a community organization that is active in the field of defending the rights of people with disabilities, while he is fighting to make his decisions either to protect the lives of his family members and to provide treatment for them by staying stay at home where there are some requirements or to move to another area with the threat of being bombed, demonstrates the enormous amount of fear, anxiety, and tension resulting from the occupation’s practices of indiscriminate bombing that targets all civilian homes without discrimination, and how people with disabilities are exposed to greater pressure as a result of the lack and/or destruction of necessary requirements, which hinders their movement and mobility.

In this context, we must also note the double suffering that women and women with disabilities are exposed to in light of this aggression. With the lack of access to health services and access to bathrooms, as well as the great crowding in shelters and homes, women in general, including women with disabilities, are unable to meet their health needs.

One of the displaced women said that many women resorted to taking birth control pills to stop their menstrual cycle, which has many negative health implications. Furthermore, one female activist from Gaza pointed out to a media outlet the suffering of pregnant women in the Gaza Strip who have suffered miscarriages or postpartum complications due to their inability to receive the necessary health services, which in some cases led to having their uteruses removed.¹⁴

¹³ Previous Resource. Interview Date: 11/11/2023.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Gaza: Israeli Attacks".

The overcrowding in the shelters and houses resulting from the displacement of many people to their relatives' houses, where the number of people in some houses reached 30 people in a single house, led to the lack of the necessary privacy. These effects are magnified when talking about women with disability due to the lack of accessibility, the difficulty of standing in long lines for bathrooms, and the severe water shortage.

With the first days of the humanitarian truce coming into effect, which we hope to become a complete cessation of war and aggression against the Gaza Strip, we hope that all citizens will be able to take a breath from the war and receive appropriate food, drinking water, medicines, and treatments, while also allowing persons with disabilities to have safe access to any appropriate homes.

We call upon all active Palestinian parties in the field to pay attention to the needs of persons with disabilities and their families, to facilitate their access to their basic needs and requirements, and to provide adequate support and services to them as they are one of the groups that are most affected by this aggressive war on the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, we call on the international institutions that are active in the field and contribute to any efforts to take into consideration the requirements and the needs of persons with disability and to put them at the heart of their interests and programs. We also call for providing protection to all Palestinian civilians, including people with disabilities, and to protect them from the occupation's aggressive practices.