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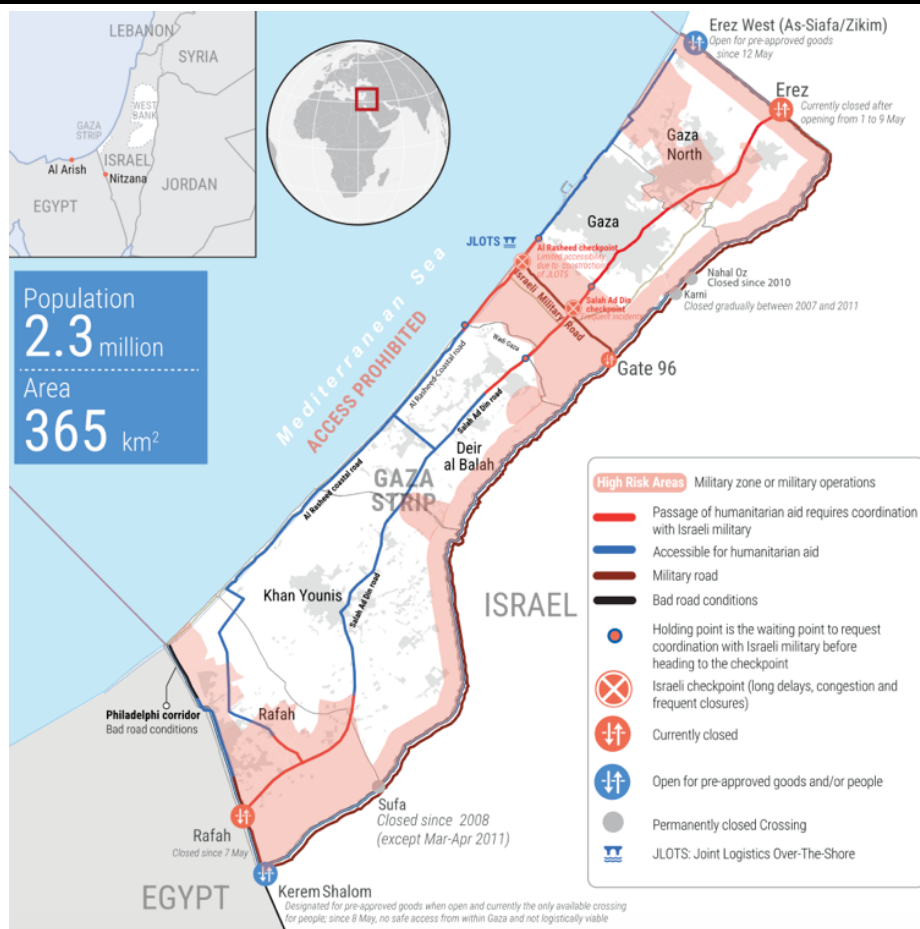


# Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Gaza

International Rescue Committee – occupied Palestinian territory  
August 2024

## Background

Ten months into the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Gaza, intense bombardment and military operations continue across all of the strip. More than 40,000 Palestinians have been killed, and at least 50 percent of the identified fatalities are reportedly women and children<sup>1</sup>. Another 91,000 have been injured. Approximately 1.9 million people in Gaza are displaced.<sup>2</sup> Since, the successive Israeli displacement orders have forced Palestinians into a shrinking "humanitarian zone." Most of these people were already displaced multiple times prior to October 7. With the loss of family members and homes, families in Gaza are shifting from residing in smaller families to large extended families in shelters and camps, further stretching resources that are already inadequate for households to survive. Children comprise around 47 percent of Gaza's population, meaning that the impacts of the conflict on children are particularly acute. Child protection (CP) risks, including but not limited to family separation, abandonment, physical and environmental dangers, injuries, psychosocial and emotional distress, continue to increase drastically.<sup>3</sup> Between 15,000 and 19,000 children are estimated to have been orphaned. More than 10,000 Palestinians, mostly children and women, are reportedly missing.<sup>4</sup> **At least 17,000 children are estimated to be unaccompanied or separated<sup>ii</sup> from their parents.<sup>5</sup>**



This report provides an overview of the situation of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) in Gaza. Including the current system, structures and processes in place to support and care for them, and the gaps and operational challenges in addressing their needs. The IRC has compiled this report based on findings from a desk review, in-depth interviews with key informants from UN agencies, national and international organizations, information and discussions from relevant Cluster and Technical Working Group meetings, and a rapid in-person assessment mission in Gaza from April 29 to May 6.<sup>iii</sup> Challenges to conducting both the desk and field review included telecommunication issues to connect with relevant actors, as well as movement and security challenges to collect data inside Gaza. To note, this report provides only a rapid snapshot of the current situation of UASC in Gaza, which is constantly changing given the highly volatile context.

<sup>i</sup> OCHA oPt

<sup>ii</sup> Unaccompanied children are separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so. While, separated children are separated from both parents, or from their previous primary or customary caregiver, but not necessarily other relatives.

<sup>iii</sup> Interviews were conducted with the following stakeholders to inform this report: Patrizia Benvenuti (UNICEF, UASC TWG Lead); Jessica Dixon (National CP AoR Coordinator); Maria Dantcheva, Alreq Reem (SOS Children's Villages International); Maria Alvarez Perez, Maria Espinosa Serrano (UNRWA, UASC TWG co-leads); Bahaa Fares, Nabil Awad (Save for Youth Future Society); Rand Baba (Tamer - Tamer Institute for Community Education); Suha Ziyada, Reema Khawla (Psychosocial Counselling Centre for Women (PSCCW)).

## Key Findings

### Current situation of UASC

At least 17,000 children are estimated to be unaccompanied or separated from their parents in Gaza, which represents about one percent of the overall displaced population of 1.7 million.<sup>6</sup> This is a conservative estimate - in typical emergency contexts, the rate of separation is estimated to be closer to between three and five percent. In April 2024, UNICEF's post-distribution monitoring for multipurpose cash assistance (MPCA) found that out of 1,578 respondents, 41 percent of families had been taking care of children who are not their own since October,<sup>7</sup> indicating that the real rate of separate in Gaza may be significantly higher than the currently estimated rate of one percent, or even the broadly applied rate of between three and five percent for emergency contexts.

Between January and February 2024, the CP Area of Responsibility (AoR) reported that 384 unaccompanied and separated children were identified and registered and received support in shelters or other alternative care arrangements.<sup>8</sup> However, it is difficult to get a comprehensive number of UASC registered since October 2023 because such data is scattered amongst different actors and a structured system to identify and register UASC has only been operational since the beginning of 2024. Observations from UN agencies, other NGOs, and the IRC confirms the high presence of separated children. **Observations have also indicated that there is a lower but still significant number, in comparison, of unaccompanied children. However, the collection and verification of data on UASC, and the disaggregation within that data, has been very difficult due to challenging security and humanitarian conditions.** The number of *registered* UASC might appear low. There are also important protective factors at the community level which may contribute to a low number of registered UASC, as families (related or unrelated to the child) spontaneously take care of children who are left alone.

Generally, CP actors agree that **the number of UASC (registered and unregistered) is likely to increase due to the repeated mass displacements and the associated risk of primary and secondary family separation**, which has increased drastically since May. Further, the number of registered UASC will continue to rise as the registration system is increasingly utilized within the humanitarian community and population. Especially in the event of a ceasefire, due to improved access and security conditions to identify and register UASC.

Many UASC have been identified in hospitals, medical points, shelters, during recreational activities for children and during distributions of supplies. Medical professionals explained that the extremely high number of children without surviving family members arriving for medical care has caused a new acronym to be coined to identify them: 'WCNSF', meaning '**Wounded Child with No Surviving Family**'.<sup>9</sup> During IRC's mission to Gaza, doctors also reported that many of these children effectively live in the hospital as no one was taking care of them.

Families have been separated during people's multiple displacements from the north and center to the south; when children and/or their parents were arrested by Israeli forces; and while children were evacuated for urgent medical treatment within Gaza or to third countries. The disruption of telecommunication has made it difficult for families and children to find each other. The ongoing attacks on Rafah since May 6 further increase the risk of family separation, as confirmed by CP actors on the ground.<sup>10</sup> Given the lack of resources and assistance available within Gaza, UASC are at especially high risk of child labor, sexual and other forms of exploitation, engagement in illegal activities, neglect, starvation, recruitment, illegal adoption, discrimination, poor mental health and experiencing grief, depression and isolation, as well as disability, violence, injury and death. **The longer a child is separated, the greater their exposure is to these risks.**



## Current system and structure in place to care for UASC

Until October 2024, the UASC Technical Working Group (TWG), which is part of the Child Protection AoR for the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) and led by UNICEF together with UNRWA, acted as the forum for organizations to ensure the appropriate identification, documentation, tracing and reunification (IDTR) of UASC with their families, as well as to facilitate the prevention of family separation and strengthen preparedness. Since Mid-October, the working group has been transformed into an Advisory Group with a limited number of members.

In early 2024, the UASC TWG developed the standard operating procedures (SOPs) to guide the IDTR process of UASC and a specific referral pathway for unaccompanied children (UAC). This referral pathway outlines that once an UAC is identified, SOS Children's Villages International, UNICEF and the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) will be notified. Following this, the case will be reviewed by an UASC committee (comprised of SOS Children's Villages International, UNICEF, MoSD, and other relevant actors). If the case was approved, the child will be referred to SOS Children's Villages International, where they will be taken in charge until reunified with their caregivers and the case can be closed.

The UASC TWG has been actively engaged to scale up interventions to prevent family separation, such as dissemination of key messages to prevent family separation and distribution of child identity bracelets, procured by UNICEF. As of May 15, 105,000 child identity bracelets were distributed by CP actors in informal settlements in Rafah to help mitigate the risk of family separation. With the incursions of Rafah since May 6 and the associated lootings of warehouses, however, it is estimated that about 345,000 child identity bracelets were lost.



Child Identity Bracelets to note basic identity and family information (e.g. child's name, date of birth, parent's name, address). Photo: UNICEF

All actors are encouraged to support with the identification and registration of UASC, which involves, amongst others, the registration of UASC via a common [Kobo form](#) and are encouraged to notify the relevant parties/actors when missing children are reported. In addition to this formal registration system, informal mechanisms to identify and refer UASC and report missing children were established at the organizational and community levels. For example, family members come to UNRWA shelters to report that their child is missing and receive support. CP actors also noted that some communities created their own informal systems to report lost children. However, in other communities, referral pathways and community networks to support the identification and referral of UASC were non-existent. To scale up the identification and registration process of UASC, hundreds of CP and non-CP actors have received orientation sessions on the new identification and registration mechanisms of UASC.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, **the registration of UASC has remained a slow and challenging process.**

Currently, **there are a limited number of alternative care arrangements in place for UASC.** The arrangements that are available mainly include informal kinship care arrangements. Whereby families, extended families and families from the wider community spontaneously care for new children who are left alone. In addition, SOS Children's Villages International provides temporary care in small scale family-like care setting for unaccompanied children, or those without their legal or customary caregivers. Child-headed households were also reported, but information about these and other community-based initiatives to care for UASC is limited. Prior to October 2023, there were a few residential and foster care arrangements

for children, though more research is required to better understand them. Adoption is currently not allowed in Gaza. The provision of alternative care for children is the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), whose current capacities are limited due to the conflict.

The CP AoR and UNICEF are urgently looking for partners to provide support to families who are taking care of UASC in kinship care arrangements and diversify alternative care options for UAC, especially for adolescents. Even though a few NGOs and INGOs have started looking into this matter, **there is still a significant lack of actors focusing on UASC-related programming in Gaza, given the extraordinary needs** in this highly complex crisis. According to the SOP on UASC, tracing and family reunification of UASC should be conducted by delegated actors, including but not limited to chosen CP actors and the MoSD. Currently, communities and community outreach workers supported by NGOs play a major role in the tracing and reunification process at the local level, as the abovementioned actors face significant access constraints. **Family reunifications across Gaza are challenging and have been handled on a case-by-case basis.** While some efforts have been successful, other children and parents still wait to be reunited due to access and security constraints.

In addition to supporting the identification, documentation tracing, and reunification (IDTR) of UASC, humanitarian actors have **supported UASC as part of broader humanitarian programs**, with UASC and other children and their families benefitting from humanitarian assistance such as distributions of non-food items (NFIs), mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for children and their caregivers, and parenting interventions for caregivers. Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance, as top-up support to the efforts that the Cash Working Group are conducting, for families caring for UASC is planned once the situation allows. Some actors have also supported UASC as part of medical evacuations, and the government has issued legal documentation to some UASC. Overall, **more specialized programming is needed to address the specific needs of UASC.**

## Key actors engaged in the UASC response

The **UASC TWG** is the body that brings together actors working on UASC to set standards and ensure a coordinated response. The **MoSD** is responsible for the provision of alternative care for children, but their current capacities are limited as their staff are affected by the conflict. **UNICEF** advocates and supports actions to prevent family separation, support the IDTR of UASC and ensure appropriate alternative care options for UAC. It also collaborates with several NNGOs and INGOs to support UASC. **UNRWA** is another key actor to prevent family separation and support the IDTR of UASC in their shelters due to the high number of people searching for refuge in their 154 shelters.<sup>12</sup> **SOS Children's Villages International** provides alternative care for UAC in the form of temporary care in small scale family-like care setting and supports community-based IDTR of UASC. Another actor manages a hotline to help restore family connections, but tracing and reunification capacities are limited right now mostly due to access constraints impacted by the security situation and patchy telecommunication. **Other key actors** who are in the process of setting up a dedicated UASC response include some of the international NGOs.

## Challenges for UASC programming

Insecurity remains the key challenge to implementing UASC programs in Gaza as heavy fighting and bombardment continues to put everyone's safety at risk. Movement and access restrictions significantly complicate humanitarian operations not only *inside* Gaza, but also *into* Gaza. Movement restrictions are imposed by Israeli authorities, roads and infrastructure are destroyed, and, at the time of writing, the Rafah Crossing remains closed and security and logistical conditions are hampering aid deliveries at scale through Kerem Shalom Crossing. There is a shortage of resources including fuel for

transportation and stable power and telecommunications, high inflation, and a limited availability of cash that is required to support humanitarian programs.

Barriers to humanitarian programs include overcrowding and limited space to deliver aid, challenges in recruiting and maintaining staff, and the possible saturation of local partners to ensure the localization of the response. CP actors also mentioned the limited presence and capacity of partners to deliver specialized MHPSS and UASC programs, as many have been affected themselves and displaced. **The risk of family separation has emerged as a relatively new child protection risk, calling for more technical support to be provided to local actors.** Further challenges relate to the inability to provide urgent and safe temporary alternative care arrangements due to physically and resource-exhausted families and overstretched health personnel and facilities hampering the rapid registration and referral of UASC.<sup>13</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> OCHA, *Humanitarian Situation Update #184 | Gaza Strip* available [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> Site Management Working Group, *Rapid population needs and location tracking May, 14 - June, 4 2024*.

<sup>3</sup> CP AoR, *Advocacy Brief- Unaccompanied Children in Gaza Strip; Nov 8, 2023*, available [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> OCHA, *Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel, Flash Update #160*, 01 May 2024, available [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/stories-loss-and-grief-least-17000-children-are-estimated-be-unaccompanied-or> .

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF Gaza Cash Program, Preliminary Results, 18 April 2024.

<sup>8</sup> CP AoR, *Unaccompanied Children in Gaza*, 21 March 2024, available [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> UNRWA, *Child Protection Rapid Assessment*, Feb 2024, available [here](#); and

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/22/the-plight-of-gazas-wcnsfs-wounded-child-no-surviving-family>.

<sup>10</sup> JHOC Meeting Minutes, Gaza – 29 May 2024.

<sup>11</sup> CP AoR, *Unaccompanied Children in Gaza*, 21 March 2024, available [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> UNRWA, *Situation Report #84 on the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem*, 1 March 2024, available [here](#).

<sup>13</sup> CP AoR, *Unaccompanied Children in Gaza*, 21 March 2024, available [here](#).

## Contact Us

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