



INTERNATIONAL
RESCUE
COMMITTEE



Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Gaza

International Rescue Committee – occupied Palestinian territory
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Abbreviations

AoR	Area of Responsibility
BIA	Best interest assessment
BID	Best interest determination
CBO	Community-based organisation
CP	Child protection
DES	Designated emergency shelter
ERW	Explosive remnants of war
FTR	Family tracing and reunification
GBV	Gender-based-violence
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDTR	Identification, documentation, tracing and reunification
JHOC	Joint Humanitarian Operation Centre
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
MPCA	Multipurpose cash assistance
NFI	Non-food items
KI	Key informant
KII	Key informant interview
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoI	Ministry of Interior
MoSD	Ministry of Social Development
MPCA	Multipurpose cash assistance
oPt	Occupied Palestinian Territory
PRCS	Palestine Red Crescent Society
RFL	Restoring Family Links
SC	Separated child
SOP	Standing operating procedure
ToR	Terms of reference
TWG	Technical Working Group
UASC	Unaccompanied and separated children
UAC	Unaccompanied child
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

Executive Summary

Background:

- The objective of this report is to provide 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 UASC, and identify what the gaps and operational challenges are to provide support.
- The report is based on findings from a desk review, in-depths interviews and information from relevant Cluster and Technical Working Group meetings. This was complemented by the observations from a rapid assessment mission into Gaza from April 29 to May 6 by the IRC.
- Challenges to conduct this study included telecommunication issues to connect with relevant actors, and movement and security challenges to collect data inside Gaza.
- Finally, it needs to be highlighted that this report provides only a rapid snapshot of the current situation of UASC in Gaza, which is constantly changing given the highly volatile context.

Current Situation of UASC in Gaza:

- 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.¹ 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,² 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.³ 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**'.⁴ During

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/stories-loss-and-grief-least-17000-children-are-estimated-be-unaccompanied-or>

² UNICEF Gaza Cash Program, Preliminary Results, 18 April 2024.

³ CP AoR, *Unaccompanied Children in Gaza*, 21 March 2024, available [here](#).

⁴ 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>.

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.⁵ 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 Mid-October 2024, the **UASC Technical Working Group (TWG)**, part of the Child Protection Area of Responsibility (CP AoR) for oPt, has acted as the forum for organisations to ensure the appropriate identification, documentation, tracing and reunification (IDTR) of UASC with their families, as well as to facilitate the adequate prevention of family separation and strengthen preparedness. As of mid-October, this working group has become an Advisory Group.
- In early 2024, the UASC TWG developed the SOPs to guide the IDTR process of UASC and a specific referral pathway to ensure that all actors know what to do in case an UASC is identified.
- 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, acts 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. 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.



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

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

⁵ JHOC Meeting Minutes, Gaza – 29 May 2024.

since May 6 and the associated lootings of warehouses, however, it is estimated that about 345,000 child identity bracelets were lost.

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](#)⁶ developed by UNICEF 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.⁷ 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.**

⁶ <https://ee-eu.kobotoolbox.org/x/PxaweH0n>

⁷ CP AoR, *Unaccompanied Children in Gaza*, 21 March 2024, available [here](#).

Key actors engaged in the UASC response:

Until Mid-October 2024, the **UASC TWG** was the body that brought together actors working on UASC to set standards and ensure a coordinated response. Since Mid-October 2024, this group has become an Advisory Group with a limited number of members

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.⁸ **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:

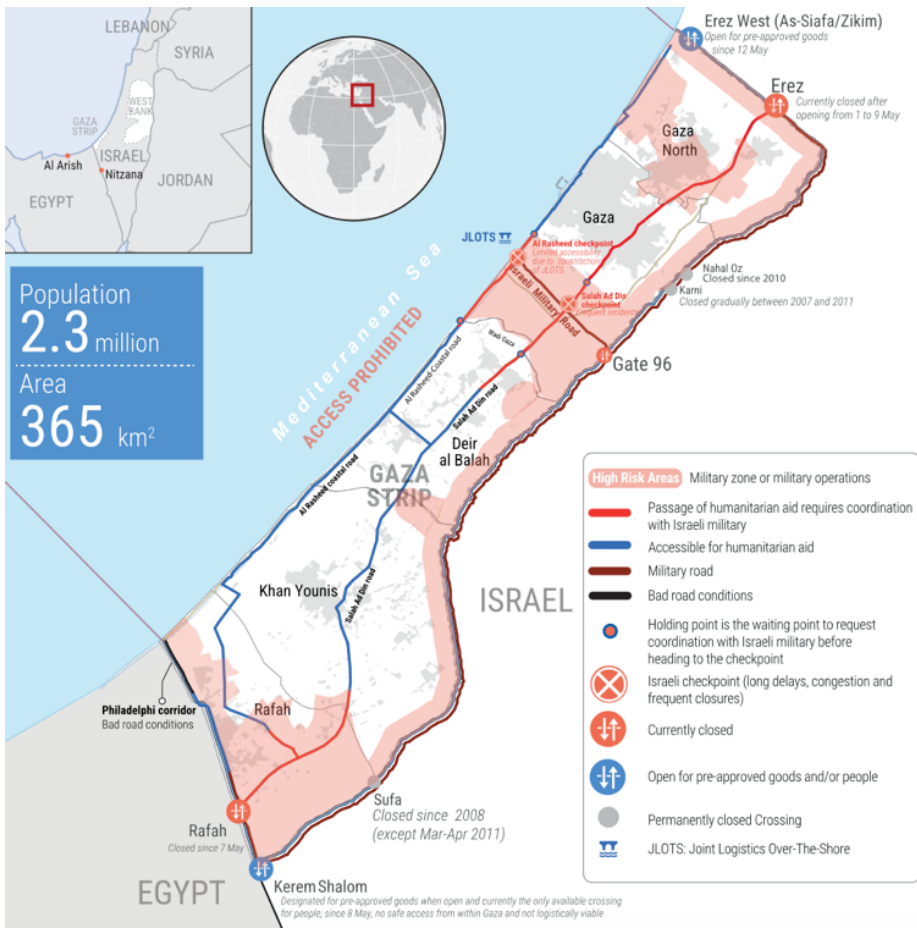
Insecurity remains the key challenge to implementing UASC programs in Gaza as heavy fighting and bombardment continues to put everyone's safety at risk. Movement and access restrictions significantly complicate humanitarian operations not only *inside* Gaza, but also *into* Gaza. Movement restrictions 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.⁹

⁸ UNRWA, *Situation Report #84 on the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem*, 1 March 2024, available [here](#).

⁹ CP AoR, *Unaccompanied Children in Gaza*, 21 March 2024, available [here](#).

1. Background



Map of Gaza. Source: OCHA, available [here](#).

One year into the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Gaza, intense bombardment and military operations continue across all of the strip. More than 45,000 Palestinians have been killed¹⁰, and at least 50 percent of the identified fatalities are reportedly women and children¹¹. Another 91,000 have been injured. Since the start of Israel’s offensive on Rafah on May 6, more than 945,000 people have been displaced from Rafah, and another 100,000 people had to flee within the northern governorates.¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ **At least 17,000 children are estimated to be unaccompanied or separated¹⁵ from their parents.**¹⁶

¹¹ 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.

¹⁰ OCHA oPt: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-247-gaza-strip>
¹¹ OCHA, *Humanitarian Situation Update #184 | Gaza Strip* available [here](#).
¹² Site Management Working Group, *Rapid population needs and location tracking May, 14 - June, 4 2024*.
¹³ CP AoR, *Advocacy Brief- Unaccompanied Children in Gaza Strip; Nov 8, 2023*, available [here](#).
¹⁴ OCHA, *Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel, Flash Update #160*, 01 May 2024, available [here](#).
¹⁵ 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.
¹⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/stories-loss-and-grief-least-17000-children-are-estimated-be-unaccompanied-or>

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 6.¹⁷ 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.

2. Objectives

The key questions that guided this desk review were:

- a) What is the current system and process to support UASC?
- b) What are the current structures or services (formal, informal, spontaneous, etc.) in place to care for UASC, and what are the gaps?
- c) Which humanitarian actors are working on the identification, documentation, tracing and reunification (IDTR), or family tracing and reunification (FTR), of UASC and alternative care? What is their caseload and capacity to meet needs?
- d) What are the operational challenges to establishing IDTR / FTR and caring for UASC in the current context of Gaza?

3. Methodology and Limitations

This desk review was conducted in February 2024 and was updated in May 2024 with observations from a rapid assessment mission by the IRC into Gaza, conducted between April 29th and May 6th. The study included the review of public and non-public documents and reports, such as assessments, situation reports, flash appeals, mappings, meeting minutes and standing operating procedures, as well as news articles from trusted sources. In addition, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with more than 17 key informants (KIs) from UN agencies, international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), working in the field of UASC and other relevant thematic fields in Gaza. This was further informed by information and discussions shared in various Clusters, Technical Working Groups, and discussions conducted during the mission into Gaza.

In February 2024, a main challenge to conduct the desk review was the difficulty to speak with some KIs who were based in Gaza due to issues with internet connectivity. In May 2024, movement challenges and security considerations complicated the process of collecting information inside Gaza. There is also limited detailed data available on the current CP situation in Gaza, particularly on the present situation of UASC. Since October 7th, 2023, few CP assessments were conducted due to the extremely difficult and volatile security situation, meaning many basic data points are unavailable. Furthermore, many more key actors should have been consulted to provide an even more holistic overview of the situation related to UASC in Gaza. However, due to time constraints, the interviews were focused on key stakeholders who were available during the desk review period. Finally, it needs to be highlighted that this desk and field review provides only a rapid snapshot of the current situation of UASC in Gaza as the situation on the ground is constantly changing.

4. Definitions

This report will adopt the definitions of unaccompanied and separated children and orphans as defined in the [Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children](#) (UASC):

- **Unaccompanied children (UAC)** are “children who have been 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.”

¹⁷ 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)).

- **Separated children (SC)** are “children who are separated from both parents or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.”
- **Orphans** are “children, whose both parents are known to be dead. In some countries, however, a child who has lost only one parent is also called an orphan.” For this report, the term orphan will refer to a child whose both parents are known to be dead.

5. Findings

5.1. Current Situation of UASC

5.1.1. Numbers and data of UASC

- **Estimated vs. identified numbers**

At least 17,000 children are estimated to be unaccompanied or separated from their parents in Gaza, which represents about 1% of the overall displaced population of 1.7 million.¹⁸ This is a conservative estimate - in typical emergency contexts, the rate of separation is estimated to be closer to 3-5%.

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.¹⁹ Many UASC have been identified in hospitals, medical points, shelters, during recreational activities for children and during distribution 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**’.²⁰ During IRC’s mission to Gaza, doctors also reported that many of these children effectively live in hospitals due to no available caregivers.

Observations from UN agencies, other NGOs, and the IRC confirm 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. For these reasons the number of *registered* UASC might appear low.

- **Reasons for low numbers of identified and registered UASC**

Before October 2023, KIs noted that the risk of family separation in Gaza was comparatively low, for which reason establishing a comprehensive identification and registration system of UASC and building the capacities of CP actors on IDTR and care for UASC were not systematically prioritized. 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. Given the challenging security and humanitarian conditions, the collection and verification of data has been nearly impossible for CP actors.

Furthermore, there are important protective factors at the family and community level in Gaza which may have obscured the scale of family separation and contributed to low registration rates of UASC. This includes strong ties with families and extended families who stepped in to take on the responsibility of children who are orphaned or no longer in the care of their parents.²¹ Similarly, certain social and cultural norms may have played a protective role, in cases in which families (related or unrelated to the child) in the wider community voluntarily assumed care of children who were left completely alone.²² Furthermore, during the period of this review, tracing of a child’s family or extended family may have been made easier by certain environmental factors, as well as active networking and spontaneous support facilitated by communities themselves. At that time, Rafah received the majority of people who were displaced and was described as a relatively small location, increasing the chances of UASC finding individuals who were known to them prior to separation. However, humanitarian actors also noted the extreme difficulties to conduct tracing outside of Rafah. Tracing in the north, for example, would be nearly impossible due to the current security and access situation.

- **Numbers expected to increase**

Generally, CP actors agree that the 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. As the conflict becomes more protracted, there is a rising concern that families’ already-

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ CP AoR, *Unaccompanied Children in Gaza*, 21 March 2024, available [here](#).

²⁰ UNRWA, *Child Protection Rapid Assessment*, Feb 2024,; and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/22/the-plight-of-gazas-wcnsfs-wounded-child-no-surviving-family>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67614139>

stretched resources will no longer be able to sustain their expanded households, heightening the risk that families will no longer be able to look after, or be forced to abandon, UASC in their care. Given the recent mass displacements from Rafah since May 6th, the risk of further family separations, including cases of secondary separation, has drastically increased again. With this new wave of displacements, CP actors are also concerned about whether families may be forced to abandon children they had newly taken on, in the event that they're not able to find new living spaces large enough to shelter the entire household, including UASC.

The number of registered UASC will continue to rise as the registration system is increasingly utilized within the humanitarian community and population. As IDTR work scales up and the presence of CP actors expands, identification and registration capacity will improve and the numbers of identified UASC will further increase. In the event of a ceasefire, improved security conditions and access are expected to allow humanitarian personnel to locate, identify, and register UASC in areas that are currently inaccessible, such as in the north.

- **Gender and age**

Given the lack of a systemised data collection process on UASC in Gaza since October 7th, there are no records available about age and gender disaggregation among UASC, i.e. boys, girls, younger or older children. From the available information, Kis estimate that there are about 50% girls and 50% boys across all age groups.

5.1.2. Identification sites

The main sites where UASC have been identified since October 7th, 2023, included UNRWA shelters (i.e. 'designated emergency shelters' or DES), medical points and hospitals, where people did not only seek assistance for medical treatment but also shelter.²³ In addition, KIs and reports indicated that UASC were identified in informal settlements and governmental shelters, as well as during the implementation of the recreational / psychosocial support (PSS) activities for children and the distribution of supplies.

5.1.3. Reasons for family separation

Family separation has occurred during multiple waves of displacement; 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. In many cases, children were separated from their families during the multiple displacements from the north and centre to the south and as a direct consequence of the ground and air strikes by Israeli forces. Multiple case studies described children being dropped off at hospitals after being found along evacuation routes to Rafah.²⁴ In many cases, the whereabouts of these children's caregivers and family members and whether they were alive remained unknown.²⁵

Electricity blackouts and the disruption of telecommunication services also contributed to the loss of contact between children and their families. According to KIs, many families reported that they had lost contact with other family members because they were no longer able to contact each other by phone, had lost their devices, and/or were unable to charge their phones due to the recurrent network or power disruptions.

Furthermore, reports confirm that family separations also occurred due to the arrests and detention by Israeli forces. In February 2024, for example, 47 children, the majority adolescent boys, were released from detention, together with other adults. Many of these children were unaccompanied, having been separated from family members who remained in detention or unable to return home when their families' current locations in Gaza were unknown.²⁶

Additionally, there were cases of children who were separated from their families while being evacuated for urgent medical treatment within Gaza or to another country. This happened notably in the beginning of the escalation of the conflict and in "very chaotic conditions". Since the end of 2023, however, KIs noted that this process had been better organized to ensure that there is always a parent or caregiver accompanying the child. In addition, evacuations outside of Gaza can no longer be undertaken without the approval of the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD).²⁷ However, the system still needs to be improved significantly as the way medical evacuations are conducted still cause family separations (for evacuations within and outside of Gaza) in several instances.²⁸

²³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2023/11/9/displaced-gaza-children-cling-to-toys-in-al-shifa-hospital>

²⁴ <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-02-20/war-separates-17000-children-in-gaza-from-their-families.html#>

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ UASC TWG, *Meeting Minutes*, 15 and 29 Feb 2024

²⁷ UASC TWG, *Meeting Minutes*, 23 Nov 2023

²⁸ UASC TWG, *Meeting Minutes*, 08 May 2024

5.1.4. Orphaned children in childcare homes and missing children

Thousands of children are believed to have been orphaned since the war began on Gaza. Numbers vary between 15,000 as estimated by the MoSD, 17,000 as estimated by OHCHR²⁹ and 19,000 as estimated by UN Women.³⁰ In addition, pre-existing caseloads of orphaned children living in childcare homes were identified as a group of children without appropriate family care. According to the CP AoR, 260 girls and 278 boys were in orphanages and state institutions in Gaza before October 7th.³¹ However, there is no information available about their whereabouts today.³²

Reports and KIs mentioned a high number of missing children. According to OHCHR, more than 10,000 Palestinians – mostly children and women - are reportedly missing.³³ While most of the missing are thought to have died during airstrikes, some are believed to be lost on the streets, or have disappeared from neighbourhoods where Israeli army ground incursions took place. Hundreds of Palestinian families have reported the loss of one or more of their children; however, verifying their location and conditions is nearly impossible right now due to the current security situation.³⁴

5.1.5. Increased protection risks faced by UASC

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.³⁵ In particular, KIs emphasized that adolescent girls face increased risks of gender-based violence (GBV) due to overcrowded shelters and the lack of sanitation facilities, as well as higher risks of early marriage. For certain families, early marriage may appear as a solution to ensure that unaccompanied young girls will be protected and cared for by an adult spouse, however in many cases, it causes physical, emotional, and psychological harm and raises risks of intimate partner violence and abuse. In addition, CP actors noted that adolescent girls have been forced to beg for money or food to contribute to the family's survival, further increasing their risk of sexual and economic exploitation. Adolescent boys, on the other hand, were considered at higher risk of being injured or killed by explosive remnants of war (ERW) as they usually go outside to get food, water, or other essential items. Additionally, there are observations of adolescent boys joining illegal activities and adopting risky behaviours, oftentimes as a coping mechanism.³⁶ Concerns were also raised about how UASC are treated within the families caring for them, including that they may be pushed towards higher risk activities or survival strategies due to their status in the household.

5.2. Current System and Structure in Place to Care for UASC

5.2.1. Coordination

Until mid-October 2024, the UASC Technical Working Group (TWG) acted as the forum for organisations to ensure the appropriate identification, documentation, tracing and reunification (IDTR) of UASC with their families, as well as to facilitate the adequate prevention of family separation and strengthen preparedness. The TWG was established in the end of 2023 and was co-chaired by UNICEF and UNRWA.³⁷ As of the first half of 2024, 18 organisations were part of the TWG. The UASC TWG has been part of the national CP AoR (Child Protection Area of Responsibility), which is the overall coordination body of all CP actors and interventions in the occupied Palestinian Territory.³⁸ Since Mid-October, the working group has been transformed into an Advisory Group with a limited number of members.

In December 2023, the MoSD furthermore established an Inter-Ministerial Committee / Task Force to guide and regulate the UASC and IDTR agenda. It is chaired by the MoSD and attended by the MOH, Mol, MOFA, Sharia Courts³⁹, UNRWA, UNICEF and PRC.⁴⁰

²⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/05/onslaught-violence-against-women-and-children-gaza-unacceptable-un-experts>

³⁰ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2024/04/six-months-into-the-war-on-gaza-over-10000-women-have-been-killed>

³¹ CP AoR, *Advocacy Brief- Unaccompanied Children in Gaza Strip*; Nov. 8, 2023, available [here](#).

³² UNICEF, *Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Gaza – Presentation for the CP Alliance*, January 2024, available [here](#).

³³ <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-160>

³⁴ <https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/6074/Fate-of-baby-and-other-Palestinian-children-is-unknown-after-Israeli-army-forcibly-transfers-them-out-of-Gaza-Strip>

³⁵ https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/gaza_pau_final_05.24.pdf

³⁶ UASC TWG, *Meeting Minutes*, 08 May 2024,

³⁷ For more information, see the ToR of the UASC TWG [here](#)

³⁸ For more information, see the ToR of the CP AoR [here](#)

³⁹ The Sharia Court is responsible for assigning legal guardianship. It is active in West Bank and has the jurisdiction to also operate in Gaza, as the Sharia Court in Gaza is not functioning right now. In the past, they have been issuing documentation, which has facilitated a number of CP case management steps. *Source*: UASC TWG, *Meeting Minutes*, 07 Dec 2023 and 29 Feb 2024.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*.

5.2.2. Prevention of family separation

The members of the CP AoR and UASC TWG have been active to support preventing family separation since the beginning of the escalation of the conflict. The following were identified as some of the key actions undertaken at the CP AoR and UASC TWG level:

- **Prevention messages**

As a first step in October 2023, the CP AoR developed [prevention messages for children, caregivers and communities](#) on how to better protect children and adults from harm and violence, how to overcome stress and, most importantly, how to prevent family separation. The CP AoR disseminated these messages by using different channels, such as through face-to-face awareness sessions implemented by members of the CP AoR.⁴¹ With the support of UNICEF, messages on what to do in case of family separation were furthermore spread through 2,000 SMS and leaflets around November 2023. This also included information on an ICRC hotline that people can call when they have lost contact with a family member.⁴² Since then, the UASC TWG and UNICEF have been working on expanding the dissemination of family separation prevention messages, such as through radio broadcasts, embedding messages in different types of humanitarian programming, and developing guidance for facilitators, shelter managers, caregivers etc. on how to teach children their basic identity and family information to facilitate rapid reunification in the event of separation.⁴³

With the incursion of Rafah since May 6th, the dissemination of messages to prevent family separation and hotline numbers to re-establish contact between family members has been scaled up.

Child identity bracelets

In February 2024, UNICEF purchased a total of 450,000 child identity bracelets to help prevent family separation. Out of them, 105,000 were distributed to partners for further distribution to children under the age of 6 years in informal shelters in Rafah.⁴⁴

With the incursions of Rafah since May 6 and the associated lootings of warehouses, it is estimated that about 345,000 child identity bracelets were lost. Most recently, UNICEF announced that they will purchase another 450,000 child identity bracelets.

5.2.3. Workflow and referral pathway

Since its establishment, the UASC TWG has been very active. It developed, amongst other resources, standing operating procedures (SOPs) to guide the IDTR process of UASC and a specific referral pathway for UAC in need of alternative care. 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 to ensure that all humanitarian actors know what to do in case they identify an UASC.

The graphs below provide an overview of the overall workflow and referral pathway when a) an UASC was identified and b) adults / caregivers want to report a missing child.

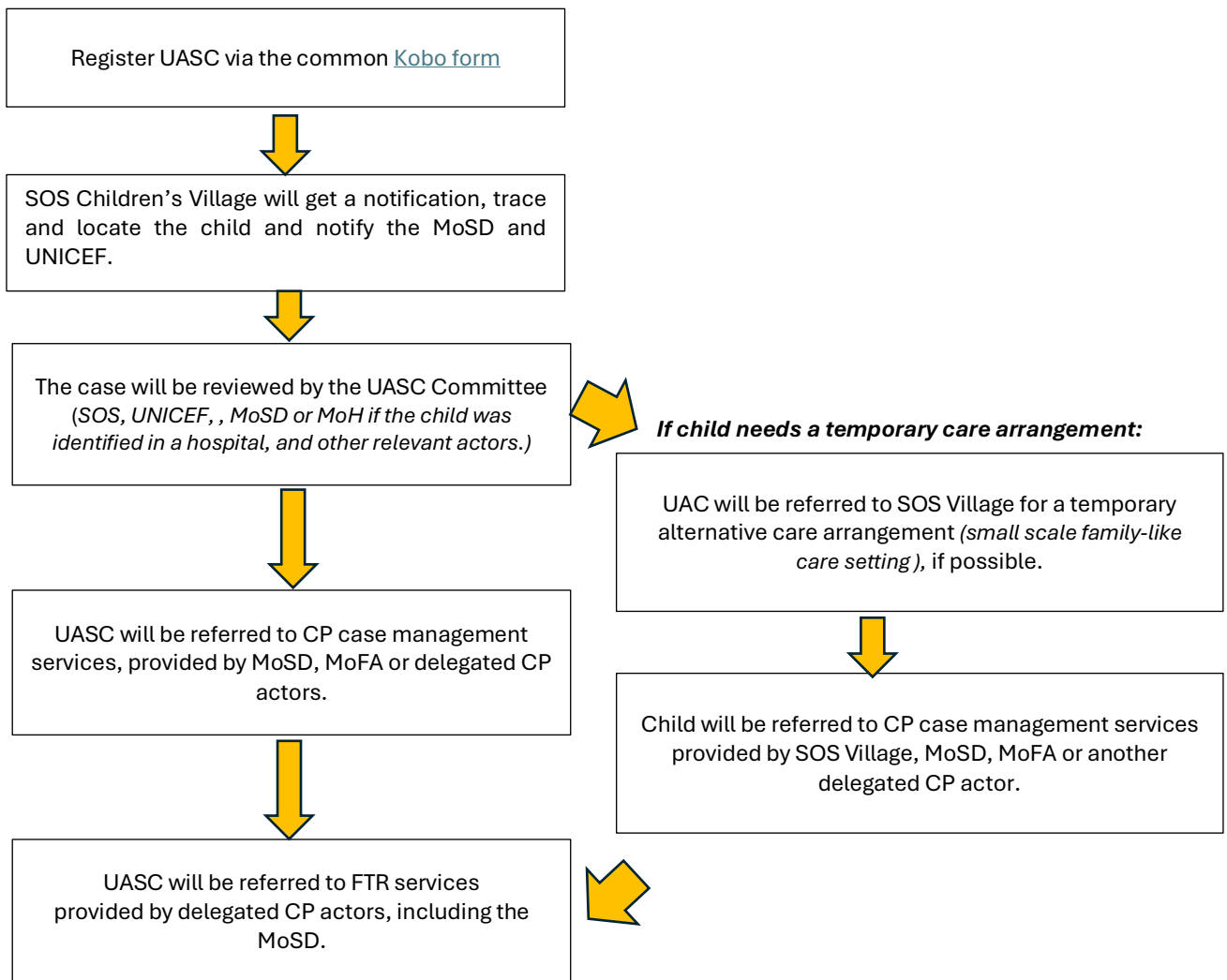
⁴¹ CP AoR, *Meeting Minutes*, 01 Nov 2023.

⁴² UASC TWG, *Meeting Minutes*, 07 Dec 2023.

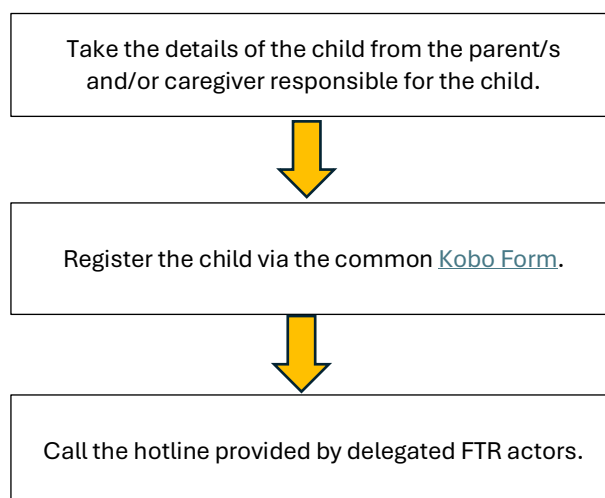
⁴³ UASC TWG, *Meeting Minutes*, 29 Feb 2024.

⁴⁴ UASC TWG, *Meeting Minutes*, 15 Feb 2024, available [here](#)

a) Workflow and referral pathway when an UASC is identified:



b) Workflow and referral pathway when an adult / caregiver wants to report a missing child:



5.2.4. Identification and registration of UASC

- **Identification and registration process**

Every actor is called upon to support with the identification and registration of UASC in Gaza. In particular, hospital staff, shelter staff, mukhtars / community leaders, UN agencies, NNGOs and INGOs, CP and other humanitarian actors on the frontlines of service provision are requested to support. Due to the advocacy efforts made by members of the UASC TWG, more and more actors have been contributing to the identification and registration of UASC since January 2024. The Site Management Working Group, for example, included questions on UASC in their questionnaire when assessing new sites, as it was explained during the IRC's field mission to Gaza in April/May 2024.

According to the IDTR SOP, actors identifying an unaccompanied or separated child (UASC) should register the child's information using a common registration form on Kobo. Once registered, the case will be referred to relevant child protection (CP) actors (MoSD, UNICEF, UNRWA, SOS Children's Villages International, specialized CP actors) for CP case management services (see referral pathway above).

Additionally, those identifying an unaccompanied child can call a hotline designated for reporting when family members have lost contact with a child. When an adult or caregiver wants to report a missing child, CP actors should take the details of the child from the parent or caregiver, register the child using the common Kobo Form, and call the hotline provided by delegated family tracing and reunification (FTR) actors.

In addition to the formal identification and registration process outlined above, informal mechanisms for identifying and referring UASC and reporting missing children were established at both organizational and community levels. For example, community members have been coming to UNRWA shelters to report missing children and receive support. CP actors also noted that some communities created their own informal systems to report children who had become lost. However, in other communities, referral pathways and networks to support the identification and referral of UASC were non-existent.

Since the incursion in Rafah in May 2024, UNRWA has also set up protection monitors to track ongoing displacements, with a particular focus on the situation of children.

- **Challenges**

In the beginning, the identification and registration process of UASC was a slow process in Gaza. The CP AoR and UNICEF noted that actors seemed to be resistant to complete the registration form on Kobo. However, the exact drivers behind this are unknown. Some KIs, for example, mentioned that they do not use this form due to data protection concerns related to Kobo. Also, they do not have access to the data after it is submitted; therefore, completing this form would duplicate their work as they would need to maintain a parallel database. In some cases, KIs reported instances of UASC not being registered or documented if they were able to rapidly reunify the child with a member of their family or extended family on the spot; given the lack of documentation, it is unclear how thoroughly relationship or family ties were verified, if at all. There was speculation that some families might not want to share the information if they are looking after an unaccompanied or separated child as they might fear that the child could be taken away from them. Also, many families would rather focus on getting food, water and other essential items for survival than prioritize disclosing that they had unaccompanied children in their care.

To help accelerate the identification and registration process of UASC, the CP AoR, UASC TWG and UNICEF have been conducting trainings and orientation sessions with the humanitarian community on the risk of family separation and the identification and registration of UASC. As of March 2024, more than 50 Child Protection caseworkers and 600 non-child protection actors received orientation sessions on the new identification and registration mechanisms of UASC.⁴⁵ UNICEF had also been considering whether the set-up of another hotline could be a solution to facilitate and streamline the registration process.

5.2.5. Case Management for UASC

The UASC TWG adopted a CP case management approach to support each individual UASC according to their specific needs and CP case workers develop an individual case plan for each child.⁴⁶ To help guide and facilitate the specific aspects related to the IDTR of UASC with their families as part of the CP case management process, the UASC TWG developed IDTR forms that should be completed by CP case workers / responsible CP staff.

In practice, however, the provision of CP case management services for UASC in Gaza is extremely challenging. For example, there is a lack of space to have private and sensitive discussions and a lack of services to which children could be referred. 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. Nevertheless, the CP actors involved in the UASC response are highly committed to ensure that the needs of each individual child are met. Even though CP case management may currently not be provided in its comprehensive form, CP actors try to support children in the way they are able to.

⁴⁵ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/13OxjxO3vqH-Wi6Q1IILVERfVYWDsH9bx/view>

⁴⁶ Training and Orientations conducted on UASC in Gaza.

5.2.6. Alternative Care Arrangements for UASC

- **Guidance provided by the IDTR SOP**

If a child without caregiving arrangements is identified in Gaza, the IDTR SOP requires that a Best Interest Assessment (BIA) should be conducted. If the child is in a high-risk placement, a Best Interest Determination (BID) must be conducted. Some UASC in the context of in Gaza are very likely to be found being adequately cared for by responsible adults / relatives / older siblings and therefore are not in need of immediate alternative care arrangements. However, the child's case worker should screen the care arrangements to ensure they are suitable.⁴⁷

- **Kinship care⁴⁸**

In Gaza, it is very common that extended families will take on the responsibility for children who are no longer in the care of their parents or are orphaned. Other families in the community may also takeover care arrangements when they identify children who are left alone. Some CP actors have been trying to organise kinship care arrangements within their shelters for children who they were not able to reunify with their families. If such arrangements could not be organised, they worked with UNICEF and SOS Children's Villages International to find another solution to ensure children's temporary alternative care arrangement.

Unfortunately, there is no data available on how many children being cared for in kinship care arrangements, how many kinship care arrangements there are, how many children each family takes care of, nor what their relationship with each other is.

Overall, there is widespread agreement that these families do not receive any monitoring or extra support to look after the children that they have additionally taken on. In an environment where families' resources are already inadequate to survive, CP actors therefore fear that these families may abandon the children they have newly taken on as they may not be able to continue to care for them in the long-term. With the ongoing waves of displacements, CP actors are also concerned about whether families might abandon children due to being unable to find new living spaces that can accommodate the entire household. In fact, IRC staff on the ground have already heard anecdotal reports about families abandoning their children due to inability to care for them.

- **Child-headed households**

UNRWA and UNICEF were informed of self-organized areas where UASC and child-headed households, as well as female-headed households, live and who receive support from the de-facto authorities. However, not much information exists about this and there is an urgent need to map those community-based initiatives.

- **Small scale family-like care arrangements**

SOS Children's Villages International provides temporary care in small scale family-like care setting for unaccompanied children, with the support of personnel specialized in the provision of alternative care. Previously, SOS Children's Villages International had focused on younger children only. However, they have recently started to accept children above the age of 10. Before the Rafah incursion in May, the Children's Villages International facilities included several houses, a school, a garden, and 24 / 7 care and supervision, including staff social workers and psychologists. However, due to the attacks in Rafah and the mass displacement, SOS Children's Villages International was forced to move to the Middle Area in the end of May 2024 where they are now residing in tents.

New placements of unaccompanied children into SOS Children's Villages International are coordinated by UNICEF, SOS Children's Villages International and the MoSD, as outlined in the referral pathway above. SOS Children's Villages International is a key actor when it comes to providing temporary alternative care option for unaccompanied children in Gaza which is approved by the MoSD. UNICEF has a formal partnership with SOS Children's Villages International to provide alternative care and other support for UASC.

To ensure that the needs of children are met, SOS Children's Villages International closely collaborates with clusters (e.g. Health Cluster, Shelter Cluster, Cash Working Group) as well as local and international NGOs and the UN, each of which provides a certain type of support (e.g. MHPSS, dignity kits, first aid kits). Recently, the organisation also scaled

⁴⁷ IDTR SOP in Gaza ("*Comprehensive Guidance Note on Emergency Response for Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) in the Gaza Strip*") p. 12.

⁴⁸ According to the UN General (2009) Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children Article III, 29 c.i., kinship care is defined as "*family-based care within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature.*"

up its outreach program and is now conducting field visits in communities to support the identification and reunification of UASC with the support of its social workers and psychologists.

- **Residential care arrangements**

Before October 2023, there were various residential care arrangements for children in Gaza. The most recent, accessible mapping of residential care facilities was conducted in February 2023, which found that there were six residential care facilities for children in Gaza, including SOS Children's Villages International. These were either humanitarian managed shelters, run by INGOs or NNGOs, and were looking after a total of 613 children (307 boys, 306 girls). However, there has been no further information available on these residential care arrangements and what happened to them since the start of the escalation of the conflict.

- **Formal care arrangements provided by the MoSD**

The provision of alternative care for children is the responsibility of the MoSD. Before October 2023, formal care arrangements provided by the MoSD included the placement of children in need of temporary care in a residential setting or with an alternative family. This focused on children who were separated from their parents due to violence or other reasons, to provide them with protection, as well as for orphans and other children deprived of family care.⁴⁹ More specifically:

- a) Residential care

Before October 2023, a study conducted by SOS Villages International estimated there have been a relatively small number of children in residential care managed by the MoSD in Palestine.⁵⁰ The CP AoR suggested that 260 girls and 278 boys were in orphanages and state institutions in Palestine before October 7th.⁵¹ However, no further information could be found on this and what became of these residential care arrangements after October 7th. KIs also did not have information on this. In fact, prior to October 2023, there was a lack of detailed information, data and reporting on these residential care arrangements, as well as inconsistency in terminology and whether different residential settings are run by the State, NGOs or private organisations.⁵²

- b) Foster care

Before October 2023, there were no formal foster care arrangements in Gaza that met the requirements laid out in the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.⁵³ Indeed, some children were placed in family-based alternative care; however, these were permanent placements, did not meet international foster care standards, and were only possible for certain children (e.g. for children of unknown parentage).⁵⁴ As of today, it is not known that there are any formal foster care arrangements in Gaza.

Prior to October 2023, there was a lack of specific evaluations and reporting on alternative care options provided by the MoSD in Gaza. While the law and strategic documents recognize that family-based care is the priority, this was not necessarily carried through in the past when allowing children to be sent into residential care due to the lack of family-based alternative care options. Nevertheless, it is also to note that Palestine is a unique context, due to different administrations in Gaza and West Bank, meaning that there is a disconnect in systems and the implementation of legislation.⁵⁵ More investigations are needed on the matter of formal care arrangements provided by the MoSD in Gaza.

- **Adoption**

According to the circular issued by the MoSD in December 2023, adoption is not allowed in Gaza, except if approved by the MoSD directly. In addition, it is prohibited for children or orphans to travel outside of Gaza with the aim of being 'enrolled' in a residential institution, except with the written approval of the MoSD.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Dr. Chrissie Gale, *The National Child Protection System and Alternative Care in Palestine*, SOS Children's Villages International, Jan 2021, p.65, available [here](#)

⁵⁰ Dr. Chrissie Gale, *The National Child Protection System and Alternative Care in Palestine*, SOS Children's Villages International, Jan 2021, p.11, available [here](#)

⁵¹ CP AoR, *Advocacy Brief- Unaccompanied Children in Gaza Strip; Nov. 8, 2023*, available [here](#).

⁵² Dr. Chrissie Gale, *The National Child Protection System and Alternative Care in Palestine*, SOS Children's Villages International, Jan 2021, p.66, available [here](#)

⁵³ Dr. Chrissie Gale, *The National Child Protection System and Alternative Care in Palestine*, SOS Children's Villages International, Jan 2021, p.70, available [here](#)

⁵⁴ Dr. Chrissie Gale, *The National Child Protection System and Alternative Care in Palestine*, SOS Children's Villages International, Jan 2021, p.11, available [here](#)

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Circular from the MoSD, available [here](#).

- **Need for supporting and diversifying alternative care options**

The CP AoR and UNICEF are actively and urgently seeking partners who can provide support to families caring for unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) in kinship care arrangements, as well as to diversify alternative care options for unaccompanied children (UAC). It was stressed that families' resources are already overstretched in the current context, and it is unclear how much longer they will be able to continue caring for the additional children they have taken in without further support.

While the number of identified UAC is presently not as high as estimated, there are a few actors providing temporary care. However, CP actors emphasize the need to be prepared in case the number of UAC increases drastically in the future. Furthermore, key informants (KIs) highlighted the current lack of, or insufficient, alternative care options available for adolescents, particularly adolescent boys and those recently released from detention who require more tailored and specialized support.

CP actors also noted that some adolescents identified as unaccompanied did not want to be placed in alternative care arrangements, preferring to stay in their current, familiar environment with their friends. These cases would require follow-up to assess their living arrangements and ensure their safety.

5.2.7. Family Tracing and Reunification

- **Guidelines provided by to the SOP**

According to the IDTR SOP, the tracing and family reunification process should be an integral part of the child protection (CP) case management service that the unaccompanied and separated child (UASC) is benefiting from and should be conducted by designated CP actors, including the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD). More specifically:

Tracing activities should begin immediately after the child has been identified and registered, and should occur concurrently with arranging alternative care if needed. The relevant actors should be contacted to initiate the tracing. In addition, the child's case worker is expected to support the tracing as part of the CP case management process, treating it as a top priority while monitoring the child's temporary care arrangement.

Family reunification is defined in Gaza as the process of "bringing together the child and family or previous care-provider for the purpose of establishing or re-establishing long-term care," which aligns with the international definition of family reunification. The IDTR SOP clarifies that there can be different types of reunifications in Gaza:

- **Spontaneous reunification:** when family members find each other and reunite on their own.
- **Reunification initiated by the family and the child:** when an agency has facilitated the tracing, but the family and child take the lead in reunification.
- **Agency-managed reunification:** when an agency successfully traces a family member on behalf of the child and ensures that the reunification follows best practices and is in the best interest of the child.

Before the actual reunification takes place, the child's case worker is required to assess if: a) the relationship between the child and the family member is genuine, b) the reunification is in the child's best interest, and c) both the child and the family member are willing to be reunified.

- **Procedures on the ground**

Much of the tracing and family reunification currently happening in Gaza can be classified as "community-based tracing and reunification," where communities play a major role in the process. For example, UNRWA noted that much of the tracing was conducted inside their shelters with the support of UNRWA case workers. In many cases, they were able to trace members of children's families or extended families relatively quickly. Additionally, other child protection (CP) actors mentioned that they were able to reunite children with their families thanks to the active support of community members on the ground and the dynamic engagement of their staff. Sometimes, families and children were able to find each other on their own, without formal support from external actors. However, there is no clear information available on the total number of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) who have been reunited with their families since October 2023.

- **Opportunities and challenges**

In February 2024, KIs indicated that the family tracing process did not represent a major challenge in Rafah since it is a relatively small location and hosted the vast majority of the displaced population, increasing the chances of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) finding individuals they knew prior to separation.

However, reports and KIs also highlighted the enormous difficulties in conducting tracing across the entire Gaza Strip due to the volatile situation and ongoing airstrikes, bombardments, and shelling. For example, tracing in the northern areas of Gaza would be nearly impossible. In addition, many people had experienced multiple displacements, making it more difficult to re-establish contact with families. There were also cases where children's families could be located, but the families were in the north while the children were in the south, making reunification extremely challenging. So far, only a few of these reunifications have been conducted, handled on a case-by-case basis. The recurrent electricity cuts and disruptions to the telecommunication network made the tracing process even more difficult.

With the ongoing incursions and mass displacements from Rafah since May 6th, the situation for tracing and reunifying children with their caregivers has become even more complicated. The situation will need to be closely monitored to assess what the context for family tracing and reunification will look like in the coming weeks.

5.2.8. Other types of support for UASC (NFI, MHPSS, MPCA, etc.)

In addition to the areas mentioned in the sections above, there are many other ways in which CP actors have been supporting UASC amidst the crisis in Gaza. The most salient actions include, among others:

- a) Non-food items (NFI): Many CP actors have been supporting UASC with NFIs through partners who are directly responsible for certain groups of UASC.
- b) Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS): Many CP actors have been providing psychosocial support to UASC, often in the form of recreational activities. UASC were frequently included in ongoing activities implemented by CP actors alongside other children from the community.
- c) Multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) to families caring for UASC (planned): Discussions are ongoing about providing MPCA to families caring for UASC. In collaboration with the Cash TWG, a draft SOP was developed to harmonize approaches across agencies. The document is currently being revised and will soon be shared with members of the UASC TWG for final approval. However, as of May 2024, liquidity and other cash feasibility issues need to improve before MPCA can be implemented more systematically.
- d) Capacity building on positive parenting skills for families caring for UASC: Sessions on positive parenting have been provided to caregivers, including those caring for UASC. However, CP actors have noted the need to scale up these programs with a specific focus on addressing the needs of caregivers of UASC.
- e) Support for children who were medically evacuated: A few CP actors have been supporting children who were medically evacuated to third countries by ensuring they are accompanied by a trusted family member or caregiver and/or by connecting them with CP actors in the country they were evacuated to. However, this system still requires significant improvement, as mitigating measures are not always systematically implemented, and the risk of family separation remains present.
- f) Legal documentation: Some legal documentation (e.g., birth certificates, identity documents, legal guardianships) has been issued for UASC, but this has been very limited. Significant challenges remain due to the general absence of governance in Gaza.

5.3. Mapping of Key Actors and Stakeholders

5.3.1. Key actors engaged in the UASC response in Gaza

Actor	Areas of Operation in Gaza	Key interventions and considerations related to UASC programming
Coordination		
CP AoR	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Led by UNICEF Brings together key stakeholders to ensure a common understanding of CP priorities to curv a coordinated response; aims to maximize coordination, maintain overview of situation, needs and developments and ensure timely and coordinated responses to emergencies.⁵⁷
UASC TWG (until mid-October 2024)	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-led by UNICEF and UNRWA Acted as the forum for organisations to ensure the appropriate IDTR of UASC with their families as well as alternative care arrangements for UAC, and facilitate the adequate prevention of family separation and strengthen preparedness.⁵⁸ As of mid-October 2024, the working group has been transformed into an Advisory Group.
Governmental Actors		
Ministry of Social Development (MoSD)	All locations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsible for the provision of alternative care for children. However, their current capacities are unclear: their staff is displaced and engagement with the UASC response is rather sporadic. Part of the UASC Committee to approve and refer UAC to SOS Children's Villages International for alternative care.
UN Agencies		
UNICEF	All locations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively advocates and supports actions to prevent family separation, support the IDTR of UASC, and ensure appropriate alternative care option for UAC. Constantly looking for more partners to support the UASC response on Gaza. Part of the UASC Committee to approve and refer UAC to SOS Children's Villages International for alternative care. Has a partnership with SOS Children's Villages International to provide alternative care for UAC. Co-leads the UASC TWG with UNRWA

⁵⁷ For more information, see the ToR of the CP AoR [here](#).

⁵⁸ For more information, see the ToR of the UASC TWG [here](#).

UNRWA	All locations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manages 154 shelters across Gaza, hosting more than four times more than their intended capacity.⁵⁹ • UNRWA is a key actor to prevent family separation and support the IDTR of UASC in their shelters due to the huge number of people searching refuge in their shelters.⁶⁰ • Co-leads the UASC TWG with UNICEF,
INGOs		
SOS Children's Villages International	Rafah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides alternative care for UAC in the form of institutional care in Rafah, with the financial support of UNICEF. • Part of the UASC Committee to approve UAC that will be taken care by them. • Focuses on children under the age of 10 years.

5.3.2. Actors part of the UASC TWG, until mid-October 2024

In addition to the stakeholders mentioned above (UNICEF, UNRWA, MoSD, SOS Children's Villages International,), the following INGOs and NNGOs were identified as being part of the UASC TWG:

- **International NGOs**
 - International Medical Corps (IMC)
 - International Rescue Committee (IRC)
 - Médecins sans frontières (MSF) - Spain
 - Médecins sans frontières (MSF) – France
 - Palestine Children's Relief Fund (PCRF)
 - Save the Children
 - Terre des Hommes (TdH) - Lausanne
 - War Child - Holland
- **National NGOs**
 - MAAN Development Centre
 - Psychosocial Counselling Center for Women (PSCCW)
 - Sawa
 - Wefaq Society for Women and Childcare

5.3.3. Mappings of CP actors

Relevant mappings of actors and interventions can be found here :

- CP AoR – [5W Interactive Dashboard](#) – Operating CP actors in both Gaza and West Bank (*constantly being updated*)

However, it is to note that with ongoing attacks and displacements the mapping of actors is constantly changing.

5.4. Challenges for UASC Programming in Gaza

Some of the key operational challenges that were identified included, amongst many others:

a) Operational challenges related to security and logistics

- **Insecurity:** Heavy fighting and intense Israeli bombardment from air, land and sea continues to be reported across much of Gaza, resulting in more civilian casualties, displacement, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. Ground operations, particularly in Beit Hanoun, southwest Gaza city, eastern Khan Younis and Deir al Balah and east as well as south Rafah, with heavy fighting, also continue to be reported. Between October 7 and August 31, more than 280 humanitarian workers have been killed in Gaza.⁶¹
- **Movement and access restrictions within Gaza:** Humanitarian operations in Gaza continue to face severe humanitarian access restrictions, including the ongoing closure of key crossings, denials of planned missions, and delays in movements imposed by Israeli authorities. In addition to denials, humanitarian movements crossing from southern to northern Gaza have faced significant delays. Humanitarian movements were also restricted by Israeli authorities due to strict checkpoint operating hours, often forcing organizations to cancel their missions. Ongoing hostilities have destroyed or damaged roads and key infrastructure throughout Gaza, posing physical barriers to

⁵⁹ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/unrwa-situation-report-84-mar1-2024/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/opt-flash-appeal-progress-report#:~:text=On%20average%2C%20UNRWA%20shelters%20are,one%20shower%20for%201%2C896%20person>

⁶¹ <https://www.unocha.org/news/world-humanitarian-day-un-demands-action-aid-worker-deaths-hit-record-high>

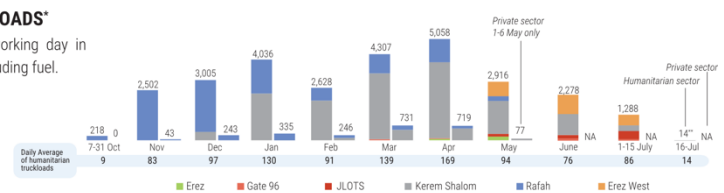
access and limiting humanitarian movements. Routes that are still available for use by humanitarian organizations are frequently blocked by debris, severely congested, and contaminated with unexploded ordnance (UXO).⁶²

- Access constraints into Gaza and regulatory challenges:** At the time of writing, Rafah Crossing has been closed since May 6th. Kerem Shalom Crossing is operational, but the prevailing security and logistical conditions are hampering humanitarian aid deliveries at scale.⁶³ Before May 6th, limited entry points into Gaza, restrictions for staff and relief cargo, unforeseen and frequent entry point closures, lengthy security screenings, and many other constraints have been limiting the ability of humanitarian actors to operate.⁶⁴ Since the closure of the Rafah border crossing on 7 May, no Child Protection-related supplies could be brought into the Gaza Strip. This will further impact the implementation of Child Protection activities.⁶⁵

INCOMING TRUCKLOADS*

*The pre-crisis average per working day in 2023 was 500 truckloads, including fuel.

*Commercial trucks are not captured in the totals following 7 May, as the UN has been unable to directly observe the arrival of private sector cargo at Kerem Shalom crossing. Fuel is not included.
**Figures for 16 July only cover humanitarian cargo via Kerem Shalom Crossing. No additional information is available as of the time of reporting.



Source: OCHA, available [here](#).

- Resource shortages and inflation:** There is a widespread shortage of primary resources, which has not only contributed to the extreme hardship of the population, but also to an enormous increase of prices in markets. Therefore, many INGOs have been procuring supplies outside of Gaza, however, it took at least two months until supplies arrived in Gaza in the past, which with current border issues (including backlogs, change in processes, and destruction of aid before it reaches Gaza)
- Transport challenges:** Transport capacity in Gaza is restricted by lack of fuel, deteriorated road infrastructure, and difficulties in getting spare parts.⁶⁶
- Infrastructure limitations:** Limited availability of suitable and secure storage facilities has led to an incapability to preposition, store, and distribute aid effectively in Gaza.⁶⁷
- Power and telecommunication cuts:** Limited access to electricity, fuel and telecommunications services continue to hamper effective coordination of the emergency response and delivery of life-saving aid. The import of telecommunications equipment into Gaza remains lengthy and extremely challenging.
- Lack of cash:** As of May 2024, the lack of cash in Gaza has made daily life even more difficult, as people are unable to purchase desperately needed food and other supplies.

Example how NNGOs are managing the import and transport of items in Gaza in February 2024:

- INGOs coordinate the assistance that is supposed to be brought into Gaza from Egypt with the support of the Logistics Cluster.
- Once the items have entered Gaza, the Logistics Cluster brings it to their warehouse that is nearby Rafah crossing point.
- From this warehouse, the NNGOs picks up the supplies with closed trucks to bring them to their warehouse. This is safer as there are many people in the streets and in need of assistance.
- From there, the NNGO brings it to the distribution point.
- For each distribution, there is a team of volunteers and someone from security to secure the distribution process.

b) Operational challenges related to programming

- Extreme overcrowding and limited space:** The majority of the Gazan population is living in a small part of Gaza that was not designed to accommodate the number of people currently living there. UNRWA shelters have four times the population they were designed to accommodate, and many others live on the streets or in informal settlements. As the humanitarian zone has been shrinking, this situation has become even more dire.
- Human resource challenges:** Many of the national staff that used to work with humanitarian agencies have been displaced and directly affected by the ongoing conflict. In this context, many local NGOs are working with the support of local community groups and volunteers to provide life-saving services to the affected populations. Even though they have also been affected, they are eager to support.

⁶² <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-access-snapshot-gaza-strip-1-30-april-2024>

⁶³ <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-171>

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ [https://www.unicef.org/sop/media/3966/file/UNICEF%20State%20of%20Palestine%20%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.%2025%20\(Escalation\)%20-%2016%20May%202024.pdf.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/sop/media/3966/file/UNICEF%20State%20of%20Palestine%20%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.%2025%20(Escalation)%20-%2016%20May%202024.pdf.pdf)

⁶⁶ https://s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/logcluster-production-files/public/2024-02/Logistics%20Cluster_Palestine_Concept%20of%20Operations_240226.pdf

⁶⁷ Ibid.

- **Saturation of local partners:** Since October 7th, 2023, many local NGOs have either tripled or quadrupled their portfolio to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance to affected populations, while being directly affected themselves. Questions were raised to what extent they could absorb more funding from INGOs, UN agencies and other donors.
- **Limited presence and capacity of partners to deliver specialised MHPSS** across all levels of care, which is largely inadequate to address the severe trauma, grief, and anxiety affecting children and their families.⁶⁸
- **New thematic priority:** KIs noted 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. For this reason, the UASC TWG has been organising a series of trainings on UASC-related programming for CP actors. However, more capacity building and technical support to local actors is still needed.
- **Inability to provide urgent and safe temporary alternative care arrangements,** due to physically and resource-exhausted families.⁶⁹
- **Overstretched health personnel and facilities** hampering the rapid registration and referral of UASC.⁷⁰
- **Extremely limited presence of mandated CP authorities,** unable to issue legal documentation for children, and identify durable solutions for UASC.⁷¹

Conducted Interviews

Interviews were conducted with the following stakeholders to inform this report:

Patrizia Benvenuti (UASC TWG Lead & UNICEF); Jessica Dixon (National CP AoR Coordinator); Maria Dantcheva, Alreq Reem (SOS Children's Villages International); Maria Alvarez Perez, Gabriela Maria Espinosa Serrano (UNRWA); Bahaa Fares, Nabil Awad (Save for Youth Future Society); Rand Baba (Tamer - Tamer Institute for Community Education); Suha Ziyada, Reema Khawla (PSCCW - Psychosocial Counselling Centre for Women).

⁶⁸ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/13OxjxO3vqH-Wi6Q1IILVERfVYWDsH9bx/view>

⁶⁹ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/13OxjxO3vqH-Wi6Q1IILVERfVYWDsH9bx/view>

⁷⁰ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/13OxjxO3vqH-Wi6Q1IILVERfVYWDsH9bx/view>

⁷¹ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/13OxjxO3vqH-Wi6Q1IILVERfVYWDsH9bx/view>