

Save the Children UK submission: Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Written evidence submitted by Save the Children UK (IPC011)

1. Introduction

1.1. **Save the Children in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)**

1.1.1. Save the Children has worked in the oPt since 1953. Since then, we have worked with partners to help provide quality education, protection for children, early childhood development support, and employment opportunities for at-risk youth. Since the war in Gaza began in October 2023, Save the Children has scaled up its response team to more than 150 staff to deliver emergency programming directly and through our civil society partners. Our core focus is child protection, health, and nutrition, complemented by critical food security, livelihoods, emergency education support and multi-purpose cash assistance.

1.2. **Why are Save the Children contributing to this inquiry?**

1.2.1. We want to share what we are seeing happening to children through our programmatic work in the occupied Palestinian territory to demonstrate the urgent need for a step change in the UK Government's approach to this conflict. We want the Foreign Affairs Committee to use the information we share to hold the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to account to ensure the Government is using every lever in its power to end this horrific conflict.

1.2.2. Save the Children has a long history of child rights advocacy with and for Palestinian children living under unlawful¹ Israeli military occupation. A 17-year-old child in Gaza today is living through their fifth war. They have spent their entire lives trapped in an open-air "prison camp"² by the life-limiting air, land and sea blockade imposed by the Government of Israel since 2007. In the West Bank, Palestinian children live in constant fear of violence under a suffocating occupation that touches every aspect of their daily lives. Israeli children have also suffered greatly, including during the horrific October 7th attacks perpetrated by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups.

1.3. **A definitive end to the conflict and ending the illegal occupation is the only way to ensure all children have a safe and peaceful future in which their rights are respected and fulfilled.**

2. What can – and should – the UK do, in cooperation with regional and international partners, to help bring about a ceasefire?

2.1. An immediate and definitive ceasefire in Gaza is the only way to truly protect children, ensure aid reaches them, and secure the release of all the remaining hostages. As a longstanding ally of Israel and a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) – the body tasked with maintaining international peace and security - the UK has an outsized role and responsibility to help bring about a ceasefire.

2.2. In parallel, the UK Government must fulfil its moral and legal obligations to do everything in its power to uphold international law and protect civilians from atrocities. The lives of every child in Gaza are at stake - they cannot wait for a ceasefire. The Government of Israel is

¹ International Court of Justice (ICJ) Advisory Opinion on the [Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem](#) (July 2024)

² [Remarks](#) by then-Prime Minister Lord Cameron (27th July 2010)

conducting a sustained military campaign against Gaza, involving systematic and widespread bombardment, destruction of civilian infrastructure, and depriving the population of the basic means of survival through the systematic denial of aid access. This has already inflicted unprecedented and potentially irreversible harm on Palestinian children.

- 2.3. The UK Government must strengthen its diplomatic efforts towards a ceasefire and an end to atrocities. It can do this by taking a more proactive position at the Security Council – leading, rather than following. It could, for example, take the initiative in drafting a resolution with chapter VII³ language to try and enforce a ceasefire. The UK also has close links with the EU and is a leading member of groups such as the G7, G20, and Five Eyes alliance. The Government should identify willing partners and coordinate as a bloc which uses the full range of levers at their collective disposal, including on arms and accountability. Impunity is at the heart of the way this war is being waged; robust consequences must be applied as a deterrent.
- 2.4. The UK Government must also recognise that a ceasefire is the bare minimum Palestinian children deserve. The UK must play its part in ensuring the Government of Israel ends its unlawful presence in the oPt, so that Palestinian children can finally live free from violence and discrimination and realise their right to shape their own futures and the future of their community.
- 2.5. The disastrous situation for children in this conflict underscores why it is so critical that the UK Government does everything in its power to secure a ceasefire. Children in Gaza have been killed, maimed, starved, forcibly displaced, deprived of education, subject to the cruellest forms of inhumane and degrading treatment, and have witnessed and endured atrocities. The UN has found children to be the main victims of the hostilities, with children aged five- to nine-years-old most represented in the verified fatalities⁴. Children are uniquely and disproportionately vulnerable to blast injuries from explosive weapons⁵– 7 times more likely to die than adults - and Gaza now has the biggest cohort of child amputees in modern history⁶. The constant fear and trauma are so acute that not only do 96% of children feel their death is imminent, almost half wish to die⁷.
- 2.6. The evisceration of Gaza’s infrastructure, including homes, schools, hospitals, and essential services has profound long-term consequences for children’s survival, healthy development and ability to live normal lives in the future. The UN Commission of Inquiry has concluded that the Government of Israel has “*perpetrated a concerted policy to destroy Gaza’s healthcare system as part of a broader assault on Gaza, committing war crimes and the crime against humanity of extermination*”.⁸ The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has concluded that there is a plausible risk of genocide being committed by the Government of Israel⁹.

³ [Chapter VII: Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression \(Articles 39-51\) | United Nations](#)

⁴⁴ [There must be “due reckoning” for horrific violations, possible atrocity crimes in Gaza – UN Human Rights Chief](#)

⁵ [Blast Injuries: The impact of explosive weapons on children in conflict | Save the Children’s Resource Centre](#)

⁶ [If Palestinian Refugee Agency Ceases to Operate, Responsibility to Provide Services Rests Solely with Israel, Secretary-General Says at Cairo Conference | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases](#)

⁷ War Child, [Needs study: Impact of war in Gaza on children with vulnerabilities and families](#) (December 2024)

⁸ [Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel](#) (11th September 2024)

⁹ [Gaza: ICJ ruling offers hope for protection of civilians enduring apocalyptic conditions, say UN experts](#) (31st January 2024)

3. What can be learned from the record of UK Government policies to date?

- 3.1. The UK Government should be doing everything possible to ensure adherence to international humanitarian law and protect children. It is empowered to do so not only by the provisions of international law, but also by the privileged seat it retains at the most powerful tables in the world. Since the change of government in July 2024, we have seen some progress in terms of the UK's approach to the conflict.
- 3.2. However, given the scale of suffering in Gaza and the diplomatic measures available to the UK Government that remain unused, its approach falls far short of what is needed.
- 3.3. The situation in Gaza is getting worse, not better. The intensification in and conduct of hostilities, mass forced displacement, and increased systematic denial of humanitarian assistance since the renewed siege on northern Gaza at the beginning of October 2024 have left children at greater risk than ever before of being killed by bombardment, starvation, malnutrition and preventable diseases. It is time for a step-change in UK policy, with an end to half-measures and double standards. While the UK cannot shape the course of events alone, it should work with other states to exhaust all avenues in pursuit of an end to atrocities and to create the conditions where a ceasefire is more rather than less likely. It is not currently fulfilling its moral and legal responsibilities to uphold IHL and protect children, and by continuing with policies and approaches that are actively harmful it remains complicit in the horrors inflicted on children in Gaza.
- 3.4. We recognise that the partial suspension of arms sales to the Government of Israel in September was a significant policy decision. It brought the UK closer into compliance with its international obligations and into alignment with allies who had already banned or restricted arms sales. However, by choosing to exempt some licences related to components for the F-35 fighter jets, the UK is still failing to uphold its moral and legal obligations and continuing to facilitate the arms transfers causing the most direct harm to children. The carveout applied for the F-35 parts is incompatible with the UK's obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty and its third state responsibility to prevent, stop, or avoid violations of the Geneva Conventions. The UK Government has justified¹⁰ this decision by making a political choice to prioritise geopolitical and security considerations over protecting Palestinian children. It should reverse this choice and fully suspend all arms licences to the Government of Israel.
- 3.5. We welcome the UK's recent vote in favour of a draft Security Council Resolution for an immediate, unconditional and permanent ceasefire¹¹. This was the culmination of a gradual positive evolution in the UK's position over the last year. Other Council members, bar one, moved to this position much sooner, and it should have happened before, not after, 14,100 children had been killed. More generally, the UK has followed rather than led at the UN, while Member States with less power and influence have tried harder. Leadership could look like, for example, drafting or supporting a resolution with chapter VII language to enforce a ceasefire.
- 3.6. If this was simply a humanitarian crisis, the UK Government's track record could be viewed positively. It has consistently advocated for full humanitarian access into Gaza and has recently adopted stronger language in doing so. The Government of Israel's failure to comply with its obligations to facilitate aid access was one of the grounds for the UK's partial ban on arms sales, even if ultimately this move was inadequate. We also welcome the current Government's reinstatement of funding to, and steadfast support for, UNRWA – the backbone of the aid response in Gaza.

¹⁰ [UK upheld some arms export licences to Israel to reassure US | Arms trade | The Guardian](#)

¹¹ [Security Council Fails to Adopt Resolution Demanding Immediate Ceasefire in Gaza, as United States Casts Negative Vote | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases](#)

- 3.7. However, the UK Government’s humanitarian diplomacy on Gaza has focused primarily on piecemeal operational and logistical issues. It has still not publicly recognised the reality that access constraints go far beyond the issues it has advocated on – such as the opening of crossings, the removal of bureaucratic impediments, and the need for effective deconfliction. The denial of humanitarian assistance by Israeli authorities is systematic and is depriving children of the basic means of survival. Gaza now has the highest rates of child malnutrition globally according to the World Food Programme¹². UN experts have declared that the Government of Israel has conducted an “*intentional and targeted starvation campaign against the Palestinian people*”¹³ and on 21st November the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for the war crime of using starvation as a method of warfare. The UK Government’s failure to acknowledge the problem means they are not pursuing the right solution, which is to replace pleas for access with the application of robust consequences.
- 3.8. This is one example of how the UK Government continues to give diplomatic cover to the Government of Israel’s conduct of hostilities by failing to condemn clear and compelling evidence of IHL violations – a clear double standard with its position on other conflicts such as the war in Ukraine. We recognise that the current Government has withdrawn its predecessor’s attempts to frustrate the course of international justice¹⁴. However, despite this Government’s stated commitment to respect international courts, Ministers have repeatedly undermined these processes in their public statements, including by pre-empting the findings of judicial proceedings¹⁵. The UK Government must consistently support the work of all independent and impartial accountability mechanisms - such as the world’s highest courts - and ensure that the effective investigation, documentation and prosecution of crimes against children is prioritised within them.
- 3.9. In his 2024 Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), the UN Secretary-General added the Israel Defence and Security Forces, the Qassam Brigades (Hamas), and the Al-Quds Brigades (Islamic Jihad) to the ‘list of shame’ of perpetrators of grave violations against children in conflict¹⁶. While there is an onus on all listed parties to agree and implement practices to end grave violations, the UK Government should use the influence it has with the Government of Israel to persuade it to cooperate with the establishment of a formal monitoring and reporting mechanism (MRM) in country. To enable this, there must also be assurance that aid workers, journalists and civil rights organizations will be protected, and their work facilitated. The UK Government must also re-commit to developing its first ever CAAC Strategy, to improve the prioritisation, consistency and effectiveness of its efforts to uphold children’s rights in conflict.
- 3.10. This is not happening in a vacuum: the atrocities Palestinian children have witnessed and experienced are partly a product of impunity granted to the Government of Israel over many years by allies including the UK. Through its selective application of international law and condemnation, the UK has effectively green-lighted Israel’s conduct of hostilities in Gaza. It has also undermined faith in the already-weakened rule of international law, including laws and norms that exist to protect children. These must be upheld under all circumstances or they become meaningless.
- 3.11. This devastating war is taking place in the context of a decades-long Palestinian child rights crisis resulting from a 57-year military occupation of the oPt by the Government of

¹² [Today's top news: Occupied Palestinian Territory | OCHA](#)

¹³ [UN experts declare famine has spread throughout Gaza strip | OHCHR](#)

¹⁴ [Britain drops its challenge to ICC arrest warrants for Israeli leaders | International criminal court | The Guardian](#)

¹⁵ [Starmer resists pressure to describe war in Gaza as ‘genocide’ | The Independent](#)

¹⁶ [Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict – Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict](#)

Israel, deemed to be unlawful by the International Court of Justice in its Advisory Opinion of July 2024¹⁷. The UK Government has still not responded to the Advisory Opinion and abstained on the subsequent UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution¹⁸, both of which confer clear responsibilities on Member States - stating only that it 'does not dispute' the central findings of the AO. This fence-sitting is another example of the UK Government failing to publicly accept and prioritise its moral and legal obligations to Palestinian children and their futures.

4. **How can the UK assure the resilience of efforts to bring about a lasting peace at a time of uncertainty caused by conflicts elsewhere and changes in leadership in the international community?**

- 4.1. Today's children are tomorrow's adults. They are the future of their communities and societies. Lasting peace depends on preventing further irreparable damage to Palestinian children's futures – and by extension, the future of the oPt itself. This requires an immediate, definitive ceasefire and an end to atrocities.
- 4.2. As well as lasting harm to surviving children, the conflict has inflicted broader damage to the future of Gaza through forced displacement, economic devastation, family and community disruption, and the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure. The UN Secretary-General has warned of "*potential ethnic cleansing*" of the Gaza Strip without decisive action from the international community¹⁹.
- 4.3. There is a plausible worst-case scenario in which Gaza is left uninhabitable²⁰ and/or Palestinians are not allowed to return to their homes²¹, and a significant proportion of the population has been destroyed²². If this happens, and if Israel is enabled by its allies to retain or even expand its unlawful presence in the oPt, it will threaten any hope of lasting peace. The UK Government must throw all its efforts behind avoiding this outcome, no matter how difficult it may be in the face of changes in leadership among its allies.
- 4.4. All perpetrators of crimes and grave violations against Palestinian and Israeli children must be held to account. Justice is an essential component of lasting peace anywhere. By adopting a consistent approach to the application of international law, the UK Government may also begin to restore faith in the rule of law. This would complement its efforts to address conflicts elsewhere, many of which are also being conducted with flagrant disregard for children's rights.

5. **Recommendations**

- 5.1. Urgent and comprehensive action is required to safeguard Palestinian children and their futures before it is too late.
- 5.2. The UK Government must:

¹⁷ [Summary of the Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024 | INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE](#)

¹⁸ [Advisory opinion of the ICJ on the legal consequences arising from Israel's policies and practices in OPT, including East Jerusalem, and from the illegality of Israel's continued presence in OPT – General Assembly 10th Emergency Special Session – Resolution \(A/RES/ES-10/24\) - Question of Palestine](#)

¹⁹ [World must act to prevent 'ethnic cleansing' of Gaza, António Guterres warns | Israel-Gaza war | The Guardian](#)

²⁰ [UN warns Gaza is now 'uninhabitable' as war continues | Israel-Gaza war | The Guardian](#)

²¹ [Palestinians will not be allowed to return to homes in northern Gaza, says IDF | Israel-Gaza war | The Guardian](#)

²² [OHCHR is concerned over the potential destruction of the Palestinian population in north Gaza - Question of Palestine](#)

- 5.2.1. **Strengthen its diplomatic efforts** to secure an immediate and definitive ceasefire, including by playing a more proactive role at the UN Security Council.
- 5.2.2. Act to ensure adherence to the Geneva Conventions, in line with Common Article 1. This includes a legal obligation for third states to **take action to prevent, stop, or avoid violations of the Geneva Conventions by parties to an armed conflict.**
- 5.2.3. **This includes immediately suspending all arms transfers to the Government of Israel.** The UK Government is currently fuelling the conflict by providing parts for the F-35 fighters jets responsible for much of the death and destruction in Gaza, as well as violating its international obligations.
- 5.2.4. **Take every possible measure to prevent the crime of genocide,** as per obligations under the Genocide Convention.
- 5.2.5. Unequivocally condemn any and all evidence of crimes and violations against children and **support relevant international accountability mechanisms** to investigate and address potential war crimes and any violations against and affecting children by all parties to the conflict, recognising their lower threshold for harm.
- 5.2.6. **Increase funding for child protection, education, and mental health services** to support children's recovery and resilience.
- 5.2.7. **Take action to bring Israel's unlawful occupation to an end,** including by taking all possible diplomatic and political measures as outlined by the UNGA resolution.

19th December 2024