

“DANGER IS OUR REALITY”

The impact of conflict & the occupation on education in the West Bank, occupied Palestinian territory



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Palestinian children have lived the entirety of their lives under military occupation and conflict. This situation has impacted every aspect of their lives from their safety and development to their wellbeing and mental health. Not only must their right to education be guaranteed, but also schools, in this context, should be their place of safety and their source of hope. Instead, many Palestinian children are exposed to dangers on their way to and from school and in the classroom, and are too often denied their right to learn due to attacks on education¹ and other threats to safe access to schools including checkpoints and the conduct of the military around schools.

Globally, attacks on education are increasing, according to a global coalition of United Nations agencies and nongovernmental organizations². Today, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory³ (oPt) are some of the riskiest places for children to go to school, with at least 1,147 incidents in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Israel between 2013 and 2017, which affected tens of thousands of students.⁴ With the Israeli military fulfilling law enforcement functions in large areas of the West Bank, bringing the military into close proximity with children and their schools, and given the densely populated area of Gaza, it is no surprise that the vast majority of these incidents occurred in the oPt.

According to the Education Cluster⁵, threats to children's education in the oPt are also on the rise, with the number of recorded education-related incidents increasing by almost 60% between 2018 and 2019.⁶ Overall, it's estimated by the United Nations Coordination for Humanitarian Assistance that more than half a million children across the oPt face challenges in accessing quality education in a safe, child-friendly environment.⁷

Children's right to education is threatened when schools, students or teachers come under attack. Furthermore, children, teachers and parents surveyed clearly stated that military conduct during 'law enforcement' activities feel deeply threatening and prevent them from feeling safe at school – this is therefore included in the scope of this report.

During armed conflict, like in the case of the ongoing military occupation of the oPt, military attacks on education violate international humanitarian and criminal law.⁸ Attacks on schools and hospitals are also one of the six grave violations against children in conflict as identified and condemned by the UN Security Council's Children and Armed Conflict agenda.⁹

¹ For the purpose of this report, we will be using the definition of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack GCPEA: Attacks on education are any intentional threat or use of force – carried out for political, military, ideological, sectarian, ethnic, religious, or criminal reasons – against students, educators and education institutions. For more background, see <http://www.protectingeducation.org/what-attack-education>

² GCPEA (2018), *Education Under Attack 2018*, <http://www.protectingeducation.org/news/attacks-education-worsening-globally-education-under-attack-2018-shows>

³ This is how the GCPEA describes the context, see - http://protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/eua2018_israel-palestine.pdf

⁴ GCPEA (2018), *Education Under Attack 2018: Country Profiles – Israel/Palestine*, http://protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/eua2018_israel-palestine.pdf

⁵ The Education Cluster is a forum for coordination and collaboration on education, bringing together NGOs, UN agencies, and other partners under the shared goal of ensuring well-coordinated and equitable provision of education

⁶ In 2019, the Education Cluster recorded 328 education-related incidents affecting 19,913 students – compared to 206 documented incidents in 2018.

⁷ Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019, see https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/humanitarian_needs_overview_2019.pdf

⁸ See <http://www.protectingeducation.org/what-international-laws-are-violated>

⁹ See <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations/attacks-against-schools/>

The scale of attacks on children's education in the oPt is well-documented through a robust UN-led monitoring system. Commendable work by the Education Cluster and the wider humanitarian community documents all the protection threats children feel in order to strengthen a targeted response. However, there is a distinct lack of research on the broader **impact** of attacks on education on children – as identified and articulated by children themselves. In recognition of this, Save the Children surveyed more than 400 children across the West Bank, to understand their perception of the reverberating impact of these attacks on their right to education.

Save the Children recognises that this was not a statistically significant and representative sample as it is drawn from schools that have experienced the highest numbers of education-related violations. However, it is felt that the findings will contribute to a dialogue on how best to advance the education of Palestinian children in the region and overcome the barriers many face.

Children identified many incidents that make them feel unsafe at school and have denied them their right to an education. These include military and settler presence and intimidation on routes to and from school, military raids and attacks on schools, settler violence and vandalism in and around schools, intimidation and harassment at checkpoints, arrest and detention, and a lack of safe and accessible transportation to school.

The children consulted shed new light on how these threats affect their emotional well-being, sense of security, ability to learn, relationships with their families and teachers, and how they feel about their future. They reported feeling fear, anxiety and stress on their way to school and at school, which manifested as physical and emotional symptoms, including uncontrollable shaking, fainting, loss of self-confidence, and despair.

Many also reported having trouble concentrating in class - troubled either by what had happened to them on the way to school or in anticipation of another raid or attack as they sit in their classrooms. Children acutely recognised how this was affecting their ability to learn and that the problem is compounded by the number of school days – and sometimes important examinations – they miss due to military presence around schools, checkpoints, and attacks on education. Children also emphasised how military presence, intimidation, and attacks on education put certain groups, such as children living with disabilities and those who have been in detention, at even higher risk.

Despite the myriad dangers, children in the West Bank overwhelmingly like school and strongly believe in the importance of education. But they want to come to school without fear and feel safe while in their classrooms. They also want their schools to improve – they want more child-friendly and accessible classrooms, better facilities, and to have more opportunities to play and go on school trips.

Their message is clear: stop attacking our education, and make our schools safe, accessible and fun.

The Israeli and Palestinian authorities, international community, and donors must answer this call and take urgent steps to ensure that Palestinian children's vision becomes a reality, as should happen for children all around the world. Save the Children is calling on all parties to the conflict and duty bearers to protect all children's uninhibited access to education in line with their obligations under international law.