

# POLICY BRIEF

## “TORTURED”: THE ESCALATING ABUSE OF PALESTINIAN CHILDREN IN ISRAELI MILITARY DETENTION

September 2025

Country:  
occupied Palestinian  
territory

### EXECUTIVE STATEMENT

Children deprived of liberty are among the most vulnerable, facing high risks of physical and psychological abuse, exploitation, denial of basic needs, lack of due process, separation from family, denial of education, and, ultimately, severe mental and physical harm. The incarceration of Palestinian children from the West Bank in Israeli military detention has long been a human rights crisis marked by systematic violations and denial of due process.

Save the Children’s past research on this issue has consistently demonstrated that the dire conditions, ill-treatment and widespread and systematic violations of human rights, cause severe and lasting harm to detained Palestinian children and their families. Since October 2023, Israeli authorities have also begun detaining children from Gaza, while in parallel carrying out mass, arbitrary arrests of Palestinians, including children, in the occupied West Bank.

In new research Save the Children commissioned in 2025, children reported being physically, emotionally and sexually abused, humiliated and starved. The research findings show that by every metric, the torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of children in the Israeli military detention system has worsened and all available evidence suggests that the Government of Israel’s treatment of detained Palestinian children constitutes systematic violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, including the absolute prohibition against torture.

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Government of Israel should immediately end the detention of children in this abusive system and release those already in custody.
2. The international community should exert their maximum influence to stop systematic and widespread child rights violations and abuses
3. The UN Secretary General should list the Israeli defence and security forces for rape and other forms of sexual violence in the next Children and Armed Conflict annual report.

### GLOBAL POSITION

Children deprived of liberty are among the most vulnerable, facing high risks of physical and psychological abuse, exploitation, denial of basic needs, lack of due process, separation from family or loved ones, denial of education, and, ultimately, severe mental and physical harm. In humanitarian settings, particularly where there is armed conflict, access to these children is particularly difficult, making monitoring and protection efforts nearly impossible. While international legal frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and juvenile justice standards provide clear protections, these are often ignored or inconsistently applied. The best interests of the child<sup>1</sup> are frequently absent from decision-making, and children are not treated as such first and foremost. Children must be treated as children, first and foremost. Save the Children believes that no child should be detained unlawfully or arbitrarily.

## THE CONTEXT IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY

The incarceration of Palestinian children from the West Bank in the Israeli military detention system was already a decades-long human rights crisis, with overwhelming evidence that the detention system was characterised by systematic child rights violations and a lack of rights to due process.<sup>1</sup> The findings from Save the Children's previous studies<sup>2</sup> have consistently demonstrated that the dire conditions, ill-treatment and widespread and systematic violations of human rights, caused severe immediate and lasting impacts on detained Palestinian children and their families.

*The message I want to send to the world is one that I believe all detainees would share: we are being subjected to brutal torture. We need help, from everyone who can help us. The world must find out what we're going through, the suffering we're experiencing."*

– Ameer\*, detained at 15 years old

Since the start of the current conflict in October 2023, Israeli authorities have also begun detaining children from Gaza, while in parallel carrying out mass, arbitrary arrests of Palestinians, including children, in the occupied West Bank. The number of children held without charge or trial, has reached a record high. All evidence signals that the detention system has become *more abusive* with not just disregard for but *active weaponsation* of child wellbeing, with *fewer* safeguards in place, and *worse* conditions.

In light of this trajectory, Save the Children commissioned new research on the impact of Israeli detention on Palestinian children, following previous studies in 2020 and 2023. Children interviewed in the research reported being physically, emotionally and sexually abused, humiliated and starved. Our findings showed that by every metric, the torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of children in the Israeli military detention system has worsened, especially following the

outset of the conflict in October 2023. This aligns with a compelling body of evidence from UN agencies, independent international investigations and respected human rights organisations.<sup>3</sup>

All available evidence<sup>4</sup> suggests that the Government of Israel's treatment of detained Palestinian children in the occupied Palestinian territory constitutes systematic violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, including the **absolute prohibition against torture**.

## KEY TRENDS

New research commissioned by Save the Children looking into the experiences of Palestinian children detained in the Israeli military detention system included a survey of 165 children who were between 12 and 17 years old when they were detained, and interviews with 32 parents and caregivers, 13 social workers, and three lawyers who work directly with detained children.<sup>5</sup> This section outlines key trends from those accounts.

### Physical Abuse

The accounts shared by children surveyed indicate that at every stage of detention – from arrest, to interrogation, to transfer, to incarceration – Israeli soldiers and officials inflicted physical, mental and emotional abuse and torture on children. Some of the children consulted said they were shot with live ammunition during their arrest. Social workers consulted reported that many children were injured during arrest, with some needing surgery due to the severity of their injuries. Most

*"Sometimes I wonder – did we really survive? Do people make it out alive? Do humans even have this kind of brutality?"*

– Ashraf\*, detained at 16 years old

*"I've seen other children beaten so violently that they pass out or their bones break."*

– Jamal\*, detained at 16 years old

<sup>1</sup> See for example evidence collected by civil society, reaffirming UNICEF's findings and reinforcing their critical recommendations (e.g. [B'Tselem](#); [Amnesty International](#); [Military Court Watch](#); [Save the Children](#))

<sup>2</sup> See [Defenceless](#) (2020); [Isolated: The impact of family separation on Palestinian children in military detention](#) | Save the Children's Resource Centre (2022); [Injustice](#) (2023)

<sup>3</sup> See for example [OHCHR](#); [the UN Commission of Inquiry](#); [Amnesty International](#).

<sup>4</sup> See conclusions from OHCHR and the UN Commission of Inquiry [20240731-Thematic-report-Detention-context-Gaza-hostilities.pdf](#), and [Report of the Commission of Inquiry: Israel's systematic use of sexual, reproductive and other forms of gender-based violence since 7 October 2023 - Question of Palestine](#) and <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/torture-and-mistreatment-ohchr-pr-31jul24/>

<sup>5</sup> A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, including surveys, focus groups and key informant interviews, was utilised. All the children interviewed as part of the study were from the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Save the Children was unable to directly consult children detained from Gaza, due to concerns including the risk of re-traumatisation, as well as difficulties reaching these children due to denials of access by Israeli authorities. However, Save the Children consulted civil society organisations and lawyers who directly support children detained from Gaza, to ensure that their experiences are reflected in this report. As a child safeguarding measure, all children quoted have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities. This is particularly critical for formerly detained children given the high risk of re-arrest and arrest of family members (with which detained children are routinely threatened).

children surveyed said they were cuffed with multiple plastic ties that would cut their skin and cause bleeding. Children surveyed described a coercive environment during interrogations, including reports of a plethora of abuses, without proper protections and safeguards being in place. For example, many children recounted being asked to sign documents that they could not understand as they were written in Hebrew. The majority said they were not informed of their rights and did not have access to a lawyer prior to the interrogation.

Children's accounts show that, while incarcerated, they were exposed to torture, ill-treatment, abuse and humiliation in a systematic manner, including through physical assaults, setting dogs on detained children and releasing tear gas into cells. Nearly all – 99% of children – reported being beaten with rifle butts or batons, and/or being kicked by soldiers or guards. Children described being forced to strip, and to perform humiliating or painful tasks, such as kneeling on gravel. Those who were unable to comply due to injuries said they were subjected to beating. Many children said they sustained lasting physical injuries from the physical assaults, including broken bones, head injuries and back problems. Two thirds of children reported that they were held in solitary confinement, for a range of 1 – 45 days.

### Sexual Violence

When the children were asked whether they had either witnessed or experienced sexual violence while in detention, more than half of the children surveyed reported that they had. The actual figure is likely much higher as incidents of sexual violence are often under reported due to stigma or a sense of shame.

The children's descriptions of sexual violence the children spoke of included being touched or hit on the genitals, being forced to perform humiliating acts while stripped, sexual harassment including threats, and sexual assault.

Some of the children consulted said they were threatened with rape. The lawyers consulted reported that many of the children they support have experienced sexual assault, which has included instances of rape. All children spoke of the humiliation they felt while detained, with a number pointing to sexual violence, degrading punitive treatment and gender-based threats as the main sources. Soldiers and guards would frequently use gendered insults about the detained children's mothers and sisters, threatening to rape them and stating that they would become 'sex workers'.

### Poor and Humiliating Conditions

Children described inhumane, undignified, and unhealthy conditions within detention centres and prisons, with a significant deterioration noted following the outset of the

*"I was interrogated for about 14 days. I was beaten throughout. I barely got an hour of sleep, and the food wasn't even enough for a young baby. Physically, they broke me. Every bone in my body hurt. After I was released, I developed bone issues, including a cervical disc problem."*  
– Omar\*, detained at 15 years old

#### Surveyed children's reported experiences in the military detention system included:

- 95% of children reported physical assault at the moment of arrest
- 99% of children reported physical assault while incarcerated
- 67% of children reported being held in solitary confinement at least once
- 82% of children reported being forcibly stripped naked
- 80% of children reported being subjected to physical or psychological threats
- 83% of children reported being threatened with harm to their family members
- 91% of children reported that prison conditions were difficult
- 76% of children reported that they were not given sufficient food or water
- 100% of children reported being denied contact with their families
- 78% of children reported being denied access to their lawyers, with the remaining 22% only allowed one visit
- 94% of children reported being denied medical care

*"I was threatened with rape."*  
– Ameer\*, detained at 15 years old

conflict on 7 October. Some of the key concerns raised by children were severe overcrowding, unsanitary cells, and refusals from guards to let children shower or change their clothes. Most children (76%) consulted stated that there was insufficient food and water, and that they frequently felt extreme hunger. This is a marked increase from the 2020 research, when 46% of children reported being deprived of food and water. According to the children consulted, the Israeli guards would take different tactics when refusing them food, from complete denial of food, to providing rotten food, to dropping food into the bin in front of children to taunt them.

*"In prison, the conditions were incredibly difficult. There wasn't enough food, ever. We were so hungry at times that we would tie cloth tightly around our stomachs to try and suppress the hunger. I saw people fighting over a single piece of bread."*  
– Jamal\*, detained at 16 years old

*"We were forced to drink water from the toilet – unclean water."*  
– Mohamad\*, detained at 16 years old

Counsellors who work with children described children being denied clean clothes, even when they were filled with the child's own blood from their injuries, as well as wearing the same pair of underwear for months at a time. As a result of these conditions, some children reported the spread of diseases and health conditions such as scabies and respiratory conditions. These issues were compounded by the denial of medical care to a majority (94%) of children, including those who explicitly requested it. This marks a sharp increase compared to the findings in 2022 (68%).

### Impact on Children

The impact of these experiences inflicted significant harm on these children, including after their release. The detention system has a destructive impact on the long-term wellbeing of children. Children reported a wide range of psychosocial impacts, with alarmingly high rates of feeling depression, fear, exhaustion and anxiety. For 20% of children, this manifested in acts of self-harm, a significant increase from children's testimonies from previous years, when only a few individuals reported this. There were further reports of behavioural changes such as feeling angry most of the time, having little or no will to communicate with others, increased tendency to spend time alone or over-attachment to mothers. For many children, this emotional distress manifested in physical symptoms, such as fainting, stomach, head and leg pains, which would be especially triggered by events that would remind them of detention, such as crossing checkpoints. Many children described involuntary shaking, which would be especially acute at night, preventing them from sleeping. Other sleep problems, including insomnia, nightmares, intrusive thoughts and panic attacks, were also widely reported by children.

### The impact of these experiences inflicted significant harm on children after their release:

- 71% of children reported feeling sad either most or all the time, with 46% reporting that they feel so sad that they struggle to eat
- 35% of children reported engaging in unsafe or dangerous activities that could harm them
- 20% of children reported that they intentionally self-harm
- 63% of children reported feeling afraid following release, with 59% frequently experiencing 'extreme terror'
- 75% of children reported that they 'no longer care about anything', with 53% feeling 'emotionally numb', finding it difficult to experience happiness or love
- 62% of children reported suffering from insomnia or sleep disturbances, with 66% experiencing nightmares
- 63% of children reported experiencing physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach pain and increased heartbeat when they think of detention
- 65% of children reported feeling lonely often or all the time, with 77% feeling they cannot trust others anymore

Children reported symptoms of severe distress and trauma. Most were afraid of being detained again or described a general sense that something dangerous and threatening would happen to them. Many had physical or emotional

pain when they were reminded of detention, with some avoiding situations and people that would bring back painful memories and experiences.

Despite most of the children consulted saying that they have received emotional support from family and friends, they still feel 'othered' and unable to slip back into the social fabric of their old lives. Others intentionally self-isolated, feeling that they could no longer trust people, were 'too sad' to socialise, or were afraid to be in social situations. Detention also severely impacted children's education, with 45% of children not going back to school following release.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

*"From the moment they took me away, I was subjected to torture. I was blindfolded and they set a dog on me - I thought it was going to eat me, I was so scared."*

- Ameer\*, detained at 15 years old

All available evidence indicates that the Government of Israel's treatment of detained Palestinian children constitutes systematic violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, including the absolute prohibition against torture. This has been confirmed by numerous studies, including reports by Palestinian, Israeli, and international human rights groups,<sup>6</sup>

No child should be prosecuted in military courts or any court that lacks comprehensive due process rights and juvenile justice standards. There must be urgent action from the international community to ensure that children no longer come into contact with this abusive system. In line with the UNGA resolution following the Advisory Opinion from the ICJ, Israel must withdraw from the occupied Palestinian territory by September 2025. The entire military court system should be dismantled. Until then, children currently detained must be released, to begin the long journey of recovery and rehabilitation.

*"All children [that I have been in contact with] also spoke of sexual harassment and assault, all of them were stripped many times, not just once. They would be beaten on their genitals, and many children were raped. The abuse is systematic."*

- A lawyer who works with detained children

## The Government of Israel should:

- Immediately end the military detention of children, and release those already in custody.
- Ensure unhindered access to appropriate experts such as the ICRC and UN Human Rights personnel, notably for purposes of monitoring detention conditions, the treatment of detained Palestinians, and their access to essential services.
- Ensure all allegations of violations must be promptly, impartially, thoroughly and independently documented and investigated, and perpetrators must be held to account. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and other internationally mandated investigative mechanisms must be allowed access into Israel as well as the occupied Palestinian territory.

*"I want people to understand how monstrous the experience in Israeli prisons is. I hope never to go through this experience again, and I hope no other child ever endures it. I want to go back to school and live my life like other children around the world."*

- Ameer\*, detained at 15 years old

- Take all measures to prevent and investigate allegations of 'enforced disappearances'. Families must be promptly informed about the fate and whereabouts of their children, including through coordination with the ICRC.

- Immediately stop transferring Palestinian girls and boys out of the occupied Palestinian territory, in line with Article 76 of the Fourth Geneva Convention

- Ensure access to adequate, effective and prompt reparation including restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition for child victims of grave and other serious violations of international human rights law and serious violations of international

*"I constantly feel helpless and that I have no future, because I could be re-arrested at any moment. Although I was released, I'm not truly free."*

- Jamal\*, detained at 16 years old

<sup>6</sup> See for example evidence collected by civil society, reaffirming UNICEF's findings and reinforcing their critical recommendations (e.g. [OHCHR](#), [B'Tselem](#); [Amnesty International](#); [Military Court Watch](#); [Save the Children](#))

humanitarian law, including arbitrary detention and torture or other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment, and all forms of sexual and gender-based violence.

**The international community, including Member States, should:**

- Demand that the Government of Israel stops the detention, torture and abuse of children, including practices that breach the absolute prohibition against cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.
- Exert their maximum influence to stop systematic and widespread child rights violations and abuses, and violations of international humanitarian law and to prevent their further commission.
- Request and support independent documentation and investigation into reports of ill-treatment in accordance with international standards and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.
- Increase funding and technical support for child protection and education services that support children who have been detained.
- The UN Secretary General should list the Israeli defence and security forces for rape and other forms of sexual violence in the next Children and Armed Conflict annual report.