Report on the Condition of Children and Youth in Israel following the Swords of Iron War

Executive Summary | July 2024

Background

The Report on the Condition of Children and Youth in Israel following the Swords of Iron War was written on request of the Director General of the Ministry of Justice, who heads the Directors General's Committee for the Rights of Children and Youth. The Directors General's Committee for the Rights of Children and Youth (the "Committee") was established by Government Resolution No. 1652 (19 June 2022). The committee members are the Directors General of several key Ministries, including the Ministry of Education; Welfare and Social Affairs; Health; National Security; Aliyah and Integration; and Finance. The Committee is tasked with coordinating government policy on inter-ministerial issues regarding the rights of children and youth. The report was presented on the third meeting of the Committee, held on 30 July 2024. The previous meeting of the Committee, held on the International Children's Day (20 November 2023) was also dedicated to addressing pressing key issues from the Swords of Iron war (the "War"). Alongside the submission of the report, the Committee heard directly from youth representatives who presented their needs during the war. Youth were consulted in other opportunities as well. For example, youth representatives have been included in the multi-sectoral round table on the issue of Children and Youth during War. In addition, consultations were held with displaced youth led jointly by the NGO Israel National Council for the Child, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs. By engaging directly with the youth, the Government was able to better identify and address their needs.

Goals

The primary goals of this report were to present the Committee with an overview of the current state of Israeli children and youth during the War, to map the governmental and inter-ministerial work on the issue, and to highlight key issues that require inter-ministerial attention, in order to assist the Committee in making informed decisions at this time. Therefore, the report addresses the impact on all children and youth in Israel, including particularly vulnerable groups such as those who were orphaned, lost close family members, were taken hostage or returned from captivity, are internally displaced, injured, or otherwise affected by armed conflict.

Key Findings

Children and Youth who were murdered

53 children were murdered in the 7 October 2023 Massacre and during the War.[1]

A few days before presenting this report to the Committee, 12 young children were murdered and dozens were injured in the Druze Town of Majdal Shams by a direct hit of a missile on a soccer field and playground where they played.

Children and Youth from Families of Murder Victims or Casualties

As a result of the War, 870 children and youth lost one parent. 1,014 children and youth lost siblings in the war.

Children and Youth who were Orphaned by the War

A dedicated inter-ministerial team led by the Ministry of Welfare and Social Security was established to coordinate the treatment and support for 23 orphans who lost both parents due to the War. The Inter-ministerial team created a unified database of orphaned children and youth, ensured continuity of treatment and coordination among all of the ministries that provided services to these families, and removed barriers in t reatment. They mapped all of the partners involved in treating the orphans and created a list of relevant key experts from various ministries. To expedite processes and ensure stability in the children's lives, temporary foster care arrangements with family members were quickly established following appropriate court decisions. Subsequently, efforts were made to secure permanent living arrangements for these children until they reach the age of 18. The team also developed a comprehensive compendium of rights and services, detailing all the state entitlements available to these children.

Children and Youth who were taken Hostage or Returned from Captivity

36 children and youth were kidnapped by Hamas and other terrorist organizations and taken hostage to the Gaza Strip during the October 7 Massacre.[2]

34 of these children returned in late November 2023 as part of the hostage release deal. Two children – Ariel and Kfir Bibas, who were 4 years old and 10 months old when they were kidnapped – are still being held hostage in Gaza.

The Government created a coordinated procedure for supporting children and youth who have returned from captivity. A special inter-ministerial team formulated a plan for hosting, caring for and assisting the victims, as their treatment involves medical, mental health and social aspects. The framework was established jointly by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF); and the Ministries of Health (MoH), Education, Welfare and Social Security, Justice, the National Insurance Institute and the Prime Minister's Office. The MoH and the hospitals were prepared to receive the children and youth who returned from captivity and provided them with individually tailored medical and psychological care. A social worker was assigned to each returned hostage to coordinate long-term care and formulate a holistic therapeutic response within the community. The procedure is continuously updated according to lessons learned from ongoing experience.

[1] This number includes those who were murdered in Majdal Shams.

[2] This number includes those who were under 18 on 7 October 2023.

Children and Youth with family members who are hostages or returned from captivity

91 children and youth have a parent who has been taken hostage, and 7 children had both parents taken and held hostage in Gaza. Currently, 157 children and youth have a first-degree relative who is still held hostage by terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip.

Children Injured During the War or otherwise recognized as victims of an armed conflict

Approximately 19,900 children and youth have been recognized by the National Insurance Institute as victims of terrorist attacks as a result of the war, meaning they were present during an attack and sustained psychological or physical damage. Some recognition procedures are still ongoing. Most injuries resulting from the war are psychologial.

According to the MoH data, as of June 2024, 275 children under the age of 10 were injured during the war. 376 children and youth aged 10 to 20 were injured. This data does not include the children injured in Majdal Shams.

1,873 children and youth have been recognized with disabilities, due to terror attacks, meaning they were present at an attack and have sustained significant psychological or physical disability (over 20%).

To respond to the urgent need to protect child victims of the war, a temporary order was issued by the Ministry of Justice - Amendment of Evidence Law (Protection of Children) Law 5715-1955 - to expand the authority of child investigators. The Order authorizes specially trained social workers to investigate children affected by terrorism and extends the age range for such investigations to include youth up to 15 years old (previously 14) for offenses committed between October 7th -9th, 2023, and for crimes committed during captivity. Furthermore, the Enforcement Authorities have been instructed to minimize child interrogations as much as possible, only conducting them when absolutely necessary and when the child is the sole witness to the matter.

Children and Youth who are internally displaced

Approximately 50,000 children and youth were internally displaced. To protect displaced children in the places to which they were removed, the multi-sectoral round table Children and youth during the war published a recommendations paper. Additionally, in accord with a decision of the Permanent Directors General's Committee for Children and Youth, an inter-governmental team led by the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministries of National Security and Justice was established in order to address this issue. In accord with the needs identified during the war, a

digital tool was developed to coordinate responses for displaced youth. A questionnaire was circulated to map the services provided to youth housed in temporary housing facilities. Based on the replies to the questionnaire, a digital dashboard presents up-to-date data on the number of children and youth staying in each temporary housing facility, as well as on every hotel in which displaced persons were housed. The digital dashboard also categorizes the services provided to youth (ages 13 to 18) in each hotel. The services are categorized by type and field of service, and by their target audiences.

Exposure to harmful content online

Since the beginning of the war, terrifying videos and images related to terrorist acts were posted online, including videos from the October 7 Massacre. Due to the war, more children and youth have been spending longer hours online and on social media, leading to the increased exposure to this harmful content.

A survey conducted by the Child Online Protection Bureau at the Ministry of National Security revealed that 63% of youth reported being exposed to difficult and offensive content related to the war, with 61% experiencing fears and distress as a result. Additionally, 57% encountered disturbing hate speech or anti-semitic discourse on social media or online games.

A separate study held by Prof. Yossi Harel-Fisch, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, found that exposure to war-related content on social media has severe impacts on youth. Those reporting high exposure to distressing content were twice as likely to experience mental distress, five times more likely to consume alcohol, and six times more likely to engage in cyberbullying.

Recommendations

The report highlights the severe impact of the war on children and youth in Israel, addressing both particularly vulnerable groups and the general population of children and youth.

Based on the report and the professional discussions held in various forums, several recommendations were formulated and presented to the Directors General's Committee. These recommendations aim to enhance coordination between government ministries during emergency situations, with a focus on improving the governmental response for children and youth in the future. For instance, it was recommended to develop a unified database and to improve the information transfer between government ministries in emergency situations.

Additionally, it was found that a multi-sectoral forum, which includes civil society and youth, was effective in identifying challenges. The convening of the Directors General's Committee to address wartime issues was also deemed important and productive. Therefore, it was recommended to continue this best practice.