

## THE IMPACT OF AN ARMED CONFLICT ON CHILDREN

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**Abstract:** *The paper analyses the impact of armed conflicts, explicitly on children. Methodologically, the research is based on a qualitative case study approach, using documentary analysis of UN and UNHCR reports, resolutions and statements from international organisations, as well as the international and regional press information.*

*The results of the analysis show the impact of an armed conflict on children, affecting their development and childhood. The paper shows the psychological consequences derived from the number of casualties and lack of provisions, such as medicine and food, and from the impact of displacement.*

**Keywords:** *children; armed conflict; UN; HRMU; UNHCR.*

### Prolegomena

Armed conflicts redefine maps, destroy cities and lives and rewrite the future of states and people. For millions of children around the world, war is not just a headline in the newspaper, but a daily reality, one in which safety becomes uncertain, routine dissolves and maturation accelerates under pressure. Childhood, meant to be a season of discovery, becomes a terrain of survival.

Recent wars and conflicts have led to significant increases in mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression across societies. Exposure to conflict and terrorism has prompted significant investment in psychological support, as well as the development of social cohesion strategies designed to foster resilience among the population. National measures and international cooperation contribute to strengthening resilience, with the potential to mitigate the multigenerational effects of trauma (S. Iancu 2024, 76). Because, more frequent than not, societies that fail to sustain the affected children risk reproducing sequences of trauma, violence and fragility across generations. The vicious cycle weakens the capabilities to form a strong resilience toward conflicts and violent events. Key factors identified for resilience include trust in government and state institutions, patriotism, and social integration. However, resilience is significantly influenced by psychological factors as well as societies' ability to adapt and recover from traumatic events (S. Iancu 2024, 71). Moreover, national resilience is most affected and declines during war, on a large scale.

Contemporary armed conflicts, characterised by their multidimensional, transregional, and protracted nature, as well as by the emergence of new-armed actors and the use of emerging technologies, continue to seriously affect the protection of children in conflict zones. (UN 2025, 2). Although, primarily conducted by states, these attacks can also be carried out by terrorist organisations with the necessary resources (S. Iancu 2024, 63). Children are directly exposed to violence, forced displacement, psychological trauma and deterioration of the security environment, consequences that more often than not exceed the actual duration of hostilities. In this context, the weakening of civil protection mechanisms and social cohesion amplifies the vulnerability of children, especially in states affected by instability and various types of hybrid aggression. Such actions generate significant risks to regional security and stability, with direct implications for the respect of children's rights in armed conflicts and the contemporary international order. Similarly, the prolonged

duration of conflicts, the continuous emergence of new armed actors, and, above all, the use of new technologies has negatively affected strategies for protecting children in conflict situations.

The latest study published by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General indicates an alarming increase in cases of children exposed to and affected by armed conflict, by approximately 25% in 2024 compared to 2023. (UN 2025, 2). The report also shows that non-state armed groups were responsible for almost 50% of violations of children's rights, but government forces were the main perpetrators of killings and maiming of children, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of access to humanitarian aid (UN 2025, 2).

The study verified 41,370<sup>1</sup> serious human rights violations, including collective violations such as attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of access to humanitarian aid. According to the study, in 2024, 22,495 children were affected by recruitment and use in armed conflict, abduction, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence (14,383 boys, 7,320 girls, 792 of unknown sex) (UN 2025, 2).

In this study, we will analyse reports from the UN and UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) to highlight the impact that armed conflict has on children, the most vulnerable category of people. The study analyses the impact through several criteria, such as: \* death and physical injury; \* lack of access to healthcare; \* lack of access to education; \* loss of home and relocation to a refugee center (displacement); \* loss of parents or close relatives. Last but not least, a section is also dedicated to children who are recruited by militias to actively participate in a conflict.

At the same time, in order to highlight the elements discussed in each subsection, examples will be presented from two ongoing armed conflicts, those in Sudan<sup>2</sup> and Gaza<sup>3</sup>.

## 1. Children as direct victims of armed conflicts

In armed conflicts, even though weapons have evolved (from swords to bayonets, from bows to machineguns and from catapults to drones), striking military targets does not eliminate the existence of civilian collateral victims. Harm caused by armed conflicts can be ranged from *direct injuries* caused by weapons (shooting, shrapnel or splinters), to *indirect injuries* (landmines, unexploded ordnance and injuries from damaged buildings and roads).

The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMU) confirmed that in 2025, more than 2,500 civilians were killed and 12,142 were injured. The total number of civilians killed and injured in 2025 was 31%, which was higher than in 2024 and much higher (70%) than in 2023 (OHCHR 2026).

In Sudan, reports indicate that over 10 million children have been exposed to fighting, bombing, mortar and rocket attacks, as well as to direct attacks on civilians, with no accurate statistics on the number of people that died (Aljazeera 2024).

In Gaza Strip, the latest data, published by the *Gaza Government Press Office*, disclosed that at least 20,000 children (*approximately 2% of the child population in Gaza*) were actually killed, between October 2023 and September 2025. (Save the Children 2025). Moreover, Israeli forces have intensified their bombardment across the Gaza Strip, damaging [...] 94% of the hospitals, killing and hurting children who are seven times more likely to die from blast injuries than adults (Save the Children 2025).

Obviously, the death of children in an area ravaged by armed conflict is not caused solely by weapons. They can also die from lack of food or medicine. In this sense, the famine in Gaza is a major problem for the Palestinian population trapped in the Gaza Strip. Over a million people, about half of whom are children, are already facing widespread famine. More than 130,000 children under the age of

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<sup>1</sup> 36,221 acts against children were committed in 2024 and 5,149 were committed in previous years but verified in 2024.

<sup>2</sup> On April 15, 2023, an armed conflict broke out in Sudan between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Fighting between the two combatant forces is still ongoing today (January 2026).

<sup>3</sup> The armed conflict in the Gaza Strip and Israel began on October 7, 2023, when the Palestinian military group Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, killing 1,195 Israelis and foreign nationals and taking 251 hostages. In response, Israel launched an offensive that killed more than 71,000 Palestinians in Gaza (almost half of them women and children) and wounded more than 171,000 (Al-Mughrabi și Farge 2025).

five are at risk of dying from acute malnutrition and at least 135 children have died from the lack of food since the start of the war (October 7, 2023) and since the declaring of famine on August 22, 2025, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health (Save the Children 2025).

According to the *World Food Programme*, Sudan is statistically considered to have the world's worst famine. Famine conditions have been confirmed in Al Fasher<sup>4</sup> (~820 km W Khartoum) and Kadugli (~570 km SW Khartoum), with the risk of famine in 20 other areas in Greater Darfur<sup>5</sup> (~1000 km W Khartoum) and Greater Kordofan<sup>6</sup> (~550 km SW Khartoum). It is estimated that approximately 20 million people (41% of Sudan's population) face high levels of acute food insecurity (World Food Programme 2026).

## 2. Lack of access to government support facilities and its effects

War imprints itself deeply on the mind. Children exposed to violence, displacement, or the loss of family members frequently experience anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, and post-traumatic stress. Fear becomes habitual.

With regard to mental health issues, a study by the World Health Organization (WHO) distinguishes between pre-existing conditions, including mental health disorders such as depression, schizophrenia or harmful use of alcohol and other substances, from those induced by emergency situations, including grief, acute stress reactions, harmful substance use, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder and those induced by the humanitarian response, including anxiety caused by a lack of information on how to obtain food or access critical services (WHO 2026).

According to the WHO, efforts to improve mental health care, such as the establishment of psychosocial support centers and mobile clinics in proximity to conflict zones, play an essential role in strengthening societal resilience. These initiatives support individuals, including children, in managing trauma and contribute to maintaining social stability (S. Iancu 2024, 72). These problems are further exacerbated by a lack of medical facilities, which means limited or no access to quality medical care, the deterioration of clinics and hospitals during conflict or their non-existence, staff shortages or insufficient training and disruption to drug supply chains.

Another issue regarding the lack of care facilities for the war-affected children from all around the world regards not only the medical centers or psychological help, but also the lack of education institutions. In the war-affected areas, schools have been suspended and children have been left without any chance of education.

Schools are among the first buildings destroyed in an armed conflict. They are damaged, occupied by armed groups, or simply abandoned as civilians flee. Schools are targeted by armed groups because they are often used as command centers. Schools are compartmentalised, offer various facilities and are easy to defend in the event of a siege. Another vital factor is that terrorist groups take refuge in school and use children as human shields. Thus, in its Resolution no. 1998<sup>7</sup> of 2011, the UN Security Council urged parties to refrain from using schools and hospitals for military purposes, including as military barracks, weapons storage facilities, command centers, detention and interrogation sites and firing and observation positions.

The military use of schools and hospitals directly hampers children's right to education and health, but also turns safe havens for children into lawful targets for attacks, and changes community perceptions of schools and hospitals as places of learning and healing into places of violence and

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<sup>4</sup> Capital of North Darfur District. On October 26, 2025, the RSF captured El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur District, the last major SAF stronghold in the region. The capture of the city followed a 500-day siege. Media reports focused on violent actions by the RSF, such as atrocities, mass killings, sexual violence, and the destruction of hospitals. (G4Media 2025).

<sup>5</sup> District in Sudan.

<sup>6</sup> District in Sudan.

<sup>7</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1998 (2011), adopted unanimously on July 12, 2011, focused on protecting children in armed conflict, specifically targeting recurrent attacks on **schools and hospitals**, calling for them to be declared "off-limits" for military use.

insecurity (UN 2025, 4). Still, Israeli forces have intensified their bombardment across the Gaza Strip, damaging 97% of schools (Save the Children 2025).

According to the *Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to the General Assembly*, attacks on civilian objects and infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, significantly heightened the vulnerability of children and increased by 44% during 2024. A total of 2,374 attacks on schools and hospitals were verified, with most attacks verified in Ukraine, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Haiti (UN 2024, 4).

In the *Children and armed conflict annual report of the Secretary-General* it is stated that, in 2024 there were registered 1,265 attacks on schools, with most affected countries: Ukraine, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Haiti, Afghanistan and Myanmar (UN 2024, 3).

Education interruptions deprive children not only of knowledge but of structure, stability, and social connection. When schooling disappears, children are pushed prematurely into adult roles: working to support families, caring for siblings, or navigating displacement alone. In some conflicts, children are forcibly recruited as soldiers, porters, or messengers, blurring the line between victim and participant and exposing them to further trauma.

Education interruptions lead to months or years without structured learning. The losses compound over time: loss of literacy skills, unfinished schooling, and greatly reduced chances of future employment. For girls in particular, the disruption often becomes permanent, as early marriage, domestic work or displacement replace school.

### **3. Lost homes and refugee centers (displacement)**

Armed conflicts are a major driver of forced displacement. Children make up a significant proportion of refugees and internally displaced persons. Uprooted from familiar environments, they lose homes, friends and cultural anchors. Life in camps or temporary shelters often means overcrowding, limited education, insecurity and heightened risks of exploitation, child labor or trafficking.

Forced displacement uproots children and youths at a time when their lives most need stability. Displacement also fragments family structures. Separation from parents or caregivers leaves children particularly exposed, both emotionally and physically, in environments where protection mechanisms are weak or overwhelmed.

Around the globe, an estimated 11.2 million to 13.7 million children have been internally displaced as a result of armed conflict (UNICEF 2025). By the end of 2024, the total number of children displaced by conflict and violence rose to 48.8 million, with large populations of children driven from home in places around the world: Sudan, Myanmar, the Gaza Strip, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Afghanistan. This number included more than 19.1 million refugee children and asylum-seekers (*15 million refugees under UNHCR mandate and other children in need of international protection*<sup>8</sup>, *1.7 million Palestine children registered as refugees with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency/UNRWA*<sup>9</sup>, and *approx. 2.7 million asylum-seeking children*), and an estimated 29.4 million children displaced within their own countries by conflict and violence (UNICEF 2025). Also, according to the UNICEF's data, at the end of 2024, an additional number of 4.4 million children were living in situations of internal displacement, because of disasters.

According to statistics, Sudan is the world's biggest displacement crisis with more than 12 million people, one in three Sudanese being forced from their homes by the conflict (World Food Programme 2026). This high number includes over 3 million people that have fled into neighbouring

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<sup>8</sup> The category "Other people in need of international protection" (OIP) refers to "people who are outside their country or territory of origin, typically because they have been forcibly displaced across international borders, who have not been reported under other categories (asylum-seekers, refugees, people in refugee-like situations) but who likely need international protection, including protection against forced return, as well as access to basic services on a temporary or longer-term basis".

<sup>9</sup> In total, 6 million Palestine refugees are registered in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and the West Bank with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). These refugees are outside of the mandate of UNHCR.

countries, including Chad, South Sudan and Egypt, and approximately 8.4 million individuals displaced within Sudan (UNHCR 2024). The conflict has had a shocking impact on food provisions, with over half the population facing acute hunger, while the rainy season worsened already dire conditions in overcrowded camps inside Sudan and in Chad, where widespread flooding contributed to outbreaks of cholera and malaria (UNHCR 2024).

Sudan's war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which began in April 2023, has become one of the world's deadliest conflicts (World population review 2026). According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), between August 2024 and August 2025, more than 20,000 people were killed, with many more unreported. The fighting has destroyed cities like Khartoum and El Fasher, displaced over 12 million people and triggered diseases, famine conditions amid attacks on hospitals and aid convoys (World population review 2026).

Regarding Gaza, the conflict between Israel and Palestinian factions, which sharply escalated in October 2023, continues to negatively overwhelm the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), between August 2024 and August 2025, approx. 21,417 people were killed, making it one of the deadliest conflicts in the world (World population review 2026). "Fighting, bombardments and humanitarian blockades have left tens of thousands more injured and displaced, while widespread damage to hospitals, schools and infrastructure has led the United Nations to label Gaza's humanitarian situation as catastrophic" (World population review 2026). UNHCR has repeatedly called for lasting ceasefires that would end the misery in Lebanon and Gaza and called for the renewal of critical funding to the UNRWA (UNHCR 2024).

#### **4. Children recruited by military forces**

Many children abandon their own home in order to avoid forced recruitment, only to find that displacement actually exposes them to the risk of recruitment, especially if they have no type of documents and if they travel alone. Mostly, in Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen, the vast majority of children who find themselves in conflict zones are deemed at risk of recruitment (Save the children 2021).

According to an UNICEF study, thousands of children are recruited and used in armed conflicts around the world. Between 2005 and 2022, more than 105,000 children were recruited by different groups/proxies/parties engaged in a conflict, although the actual number of cases is believed to be much higher (UNICEF 2021). Both girls and boys suffered extensive forms of exploitation and abuse. Parties to the conflict use children not only as combatants, but also in numerous other roles, such as spies, cooks, guards, even messengers and couriers and so on and so forth (UNICEF 2021). Furthermore, living among armed actors, children experience numerous forms of violence, starting from harrowing training to hazardous labour or to being forced to engage in combat, experiencing potential risk of chronic injury and death. Many, especially girls, are subjected to gender-based violence (UNICEF 2021).

Children become part of an armed force or group for various reasons. Some are abducted, threatened, coerced or manipulated by armed actors. Others are driven by poverty, compelled to generate income for their families. Still others associate themselves for survival or to protect their communities. No matter their involvement, the recruitment and use of children by armed forces is a grave violation of child rights and, no less, of international humanitarian law (UNICEF 2021).

Although they are part of an armed group, children in the war-affected areas are still subjected to forms of torture, discrimination and forced to commit crimes in order to better integrate into the group. Children are also subjected to forms of malnutrition, especially in the context of armed conflict, where groups have limited access to food<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> In armed conflicts, starvation is used as a weapon. The army, which belongs to and is loyal to the government, closes all the country's borders to stop the supply of resources to the country. Although this tactic helps, as the militias can no longer obtain supplies, it also affects the civilian population, which is left without food. For example, the Saudi-led coalition closed the borders with Yemen to stop supplies from reaching the Houthi rebels (McVeigh 2017).

Another important issue is the reintegration of the abused children in the war-affected areas, into their families. The impact of conflict on children does not end when the fighting stops. A generation raised amid violence may struggle with trust, civic engagement and, mostly, social cohesion. Lost years of education translate into reduced economic opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and instability. Communities may be coping with their own challenges and trauma from conflict and are having trouble understanding or accepting children who have returned to their homes (UNICEF 2021). Psychological distress makes it difficult for children to process and articulate their traumatic experiences, especially when they fear stigma or people's reaction and prejudices. However, children affected by conflict often demonstrate extraordinary resilience. With adequate support, education and protection, many become powerful agents of recovery and peace within their communities.

### Takeaways

War wears down childhood by interrupting safety, education, emotional development and the horizon of future possibilities.

Societies that fail to protect the affected children risk reproducing cycles of trauma, violence and fragility across generations.

Humanitarian organisations mitigate harm, but cannot compensate for structural neglect. Emergency interventions, while vital, cannot substitute for coherent national and international policies that prioritise children beyond crisis response.

Child protection must be understood as a long-term investment in peacebuilding. Education, psychosocial care and family reunification are not ancillary measures, but core components of post-conflict recovery and societal resilience.

Placing children at the centre of reconstruction strategies reshapes post-war societies. Therefore, recovery models that integrate children's needs contribute to a sustainable development of the future.

The measure of a conflict's aftermath lies in how childhood is restored. Rebuilding cities without restoring childhood risks creating a peace that is structurally hollow and morally incomplete. Those children will, inevitably, grow up, having in mind all the horrors of the war and the lack of life conditions they have already experienced. The lack of comparison might lead not to the restoring of a society, but to the construction of a society with no vision and goals.

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