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HOSTAGES AND MISSING
FAMILIES FORUM

November 20, 2023

Health needs of infants, children and adolescents abducted to Gaza

For over 45 days, innocent Israeli children have been held hostage, after being abducted from their homes. Many of them also lost beloved family members in the October 7th massacre in southern Israel. Numerous horrific visuals were released of the brutal acts of violence and torture of innocent children, murder of babies, violent rape of young women, and brutal executions. Entire communities and families have been broken and separated. We cannot save those who have been murdered, but we can still save the ones kidnapped. Over 230 individuals were abducted to the Gaza Strip, about 40 of whom are babies, children and adolescents, some had witnessed their entire family murdered in front of their eyes right before being kidnapped. The multiple reports, photos, testimonies, and video footage indicate that the October 7th massacre specifically targeted women and young girls, children and infants. These constitute multiple war crimes, and crimes against humanity under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Infants, children and adolescents are at an extremely high risk for inflicted physical violence and abuse, including sexual abuse, mutilation, humiliation, and long-term physical damage. On top of that, children and infants, toddlers in particular, are prone to extreme psychological anguish and developmental delay due to the circumstances described above in addition to having to witness family members being tortured and killed, as well as the low quality of nutrition and hygiene expected during their captivity, and due to their separation from their parents, family and familiar surroundings.

According to The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), given the particular vulnerability of children, the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977 lay down a series of rules regarding special protection for children. **The United Nations Security Council has identified and condemned grave violations against children in times of war and armed conflicts: Killing and maiming of children; rape or other grave sexual violence; abduction of children; and denial of humanitarian access for children. All these have been documented and curtailed in the October 7th massacre.** It is a complete disgrace that the ICRC was not able to visit and confirm a sign of life, their physical and medical condition and their whereabouts until this very day.

Abduction of children in times of war and armed conflicts also violates main provisions regarding children's rights, including The Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 6 (a child's inherent right to life and development), Article 9 (non-separation from parents), Article 19 (protection from violence of all kinds), the Convention Against Torture and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as general provisions regarding the taking of hostages and enforced disappearance including Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, Article 8(e)(i),



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(vi), and (xi) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006).

Following the unprecedented kidnapping of Israelis and foreign nationals to Gaza, a voluntary civil organization, "The Hostages and Missing - Families Forum", was established to represent and aid the hostages, missing persons, and their families. We established a medical and resilience team, aiming to protect the health of the hostages and their families. The team includes medical professionals from different fields, all volunteers. Among them are family members of the hostages and the missing persons.

The medical team collected data regarding the hostages' medical backgrounds through a series of interviews with their family members, and received medical files, some of which can be read below, and represents a sample of the hostages or missing's medical information. The family members gave permission to collect and analyze the data for the sake of raising awareness to the medical statuses of the hostages and in order to promote the efforts to bring them back home safely. The data presented in this report is of a sample of pediatric hostages. **As of November 20th, 2023, we obtained information regarding most of the children abducted to Gaza. These include children of all ages: one infant, 9 (now 10) months old, children, 3-5 years old, children, 6-12 years old, and adolescents, 13-17 years old.** All those held hostage are at high risk by all standards of human rights to health, education and life.

The following age groups of kidnapped children s are at an extremely high-risk during captivity:

1. Infants and toddlers (under the age of 5) are prone to extreme suffering due to the violence inflicted upon them during abduction and captivity, the psychological stress of the abduction and the isolation from their parents and families, and the inability to receive their basic needs and rights in captivity.

Abigail Idan, a 3.5-year-old girl, is held hostage completely alone in Gaza. She witnessed both her parents being murdered and was separated from her siblings (ages 6 and 9) who survived the attack. Several other children are held hostage, separated from their parents and/or other family members in Gaza. Like Abigail, those children, aged 3 and 4 years old, have gone through horrific experiences, and have been ripped apart from their families.

These very young children are also at risk of physiological harm due to potential deterioration in diet and hygiene quality. According to a report from one of the hostages who has been released – hostages receive one meal a day of a low dietary quality. This is by all means unsatisfactory for a child's dietary needs for basic health, growth and development, and may cause nutritional deficiencies over time. Furthermore, a child's dietary needs may be elevated in cases of an injury, a fracture, or burns, and without supplying these demands, healing and recovery may be delayed. The lack of physical, social and educational activity is also extremely damaging.



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Ariel Bibas, a 4-year-old boy with low weight and height (under the 3rd percentile for weight and height) needs to follow a high-protein diet. He is at a high risk of experiencing malnutrition, and failure to thrive. His younger brother **Kfir Bibas** was 8.5 months when abducted and turned 10 months on 18.11.2023. He was fed by a formula-based diet. To date, Kfir's nutritional status is unknown, and it is not clear if while being held hostage by Hamas in Gaza he receives the appropriate nutrition. In the case of infants, adequate intake of some vitamins such as B vitamins, vitamin A, vitamin D, zinc and iron are crucial for healthy development. In all infants and toddlers vitamin D deficiency may develop due to the lack of exposure to sunlight, which is bound to happen due to the underground tunnels in which the children are held.

2. **Girls and young women are at extreme risk of sexual violence and abuse**, as has been documented, during and after the abduction. This perspective highlights that sexual violence is not a random byproduct, but a systematic and planned element of this terror attack by Hamas.

Sexual violence, at its core, is an instrument of power in warfare, designed to humiliate, subjugate, and subdue the civilian population and sow destruction and chaos. There is growing awareness that sexual violence during conflicts is often a deliberate, organized strategy known as 'rape as a weapon of war.' The Geneva Conventions, particularly the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, contain provisions related to the treatment of women in captivity during armed conflicts and emphasize the need to protect women from violence and sexual abuse, ensure their dignity is respected, address their special needs, and preserve family unity. These rules aim to uphold the rights and well-being of all individuals during times of war, emphasizing the principles of humanity and the minimization of human suffering.

Beyond the psychological trauma of sexual violence, it may also result in major physiological trauma, requiring urgent medical care. Denying these girls access to this essential and lifesaving medical care for their baseline medical conditions constitutes a form of torture and goes against the laws of war. We have no information at this stage as to the conditions in which these girls are held in, and as to how they are treated in captivity.

The majority of child hostages are female, with ages ranging from 3 to 17. Importantly, sexual violence is also commonly afflicted against male victims, and may also be used as a war tactic against all young boys.

3. **Ill and disabled children are at risk:**

Some of the children held hostage have previous illnesses and disabilities which demand special medical attention and consideration. These are most probably not provided to them in captivity, potentially causing damage and posing further risk to their health.

Yagil Yaakov, a 12-year-old boy has a life-threatening food allergy and carries an EpiPen. Exposure to an allergen can result in anaphylactic shock and death.



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Other hostages are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) which may result in them experiencing severe behavioral regression caused by extreme stress. Another hostage suffers from asthma, which may exacerbate in the poorly ventilated underground tunnels of Gaza, posing a life-threatening condition.

Some hostages are diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The combination of disruption of regular treatment with extreme conditions in captivity would be extremely challenging for these children.

The severe stress and mental burden of captivity would be unbearable for anyone, especially for those with prior mental health problems. Some hostages suffer from mental health conditions that need proper treatment, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Anxiety Disorder and Depression.

Summary

Innocent infants, children and adolescents were abducted and are being held hostage without any sign of life or access to proper medical care, for over 40 days. These crimes against humanity are violating international law and putting their lives at risk. These children are at extreme risk for physical violence and abuse, including sexual abuse, mutilation, humiliation, and long-term physical and psychological damage. Up to this moment, as far as we know, no contact between The International Committee of the Red Cross and the hostages has been established. This inhumane situation places the hostages at an elevated risk of experiencing further violence and neglect.

We call upon UNICEF, ICRC, and any children's rights organizations and/or health organizations as well as world leaders to act for the children's immediate release, to safeguard their basic human rights and provide them with the essential medical and psychological care they require to heal from the profound physical and emotional consequences of their ordeal.

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