

CHAPTER 3.1

GROWING THREATS TO CIVILIANS AND AID WORKERS

'UN institutions were not spared, schools were not spared and staff members of UN agencies were not spared. So how can I protect civilians when I cannot even protect myself?'

– *National NGO worker, Palestine*

The State of the Humanitarian System 2022 (SOHS) Report 2022 showed an uptick in conflict and reduced humanitarian space, both longstanding barriers to humanitarians being able to access and protect people from crisis. The scale of these challenges grew starkly in the 2022–25 period, which was characterised by multiple infringements of international humanitarian law (IHL), including increased attacks against civilians, infrastructure, hospitals and humanitarian workers. The use of indiscriminate weapons, famine and sexual violence also grew, and evidence of genocide was found in Gaza and Sudan. Record numbers of frontline humanitarian staff lost their lives in the pursuit of providing assistance; state actors became the main perpetrators of attacks, while national staff faced the highest risks of attacks and fatalities. Against this backdrop, funding cuts reduced security information, staffing and training resources, which particularly affected national and local actors. Security experts identified some areas where services could be shared and recommended supporting local non-governmental organisation (NGO) forums to retain core functions. A sense of impunity around IHL violations, including for accused United Nations (UN) member states, galvanised calls from humanitarian operational and donor agencies for greater commitment to upholding IHL and stronger international accountability mechanisms to hold perpetrators to account.

Growing protection risks to civilians

Multiple crises presented large-scale threats to civilians: in 2025, an estimated 395 million people were exposed to serious protection risks, which

disproportionately affected women and children.² The most significant threats to civilians were in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Myanmar, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Sudan and Ukraine.³ The number of global civilian fatalities in events that Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED)ⁱ coded as directly targeting civilians rose from over 44,000 in 2021 to over 71,000 in 2025, having peaked at nearly 78,000 in 2024.⁴ In 2025, the UN recorded more than 37,000 civilians killed in conflict.⁵ The Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) identified conflict-induced displacement as a key protection risk, with varied effects depending on gender, age and other identity markers.⁶ One Palestinian woman described her experience:

**In 2025,
an estimated
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risks**

'I was displaced about six times ... Around 120 people were crammed into one classroom of about 6 × 8 metres ... The classrooms were for women and children, while the men had to sleep outside in the schoolyard, under the open sky, exposed to shrapnel from shelling, the danger from drones and bombardment, and the freezing cold and rain.'

**In 2025, there were
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Violations of IHL by states and non-state actors caused widespread and deliberate harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure, including medical, communication, agriculture and food facilities. An International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) report noted growing use of cyber operations on civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and humanitarian organisations.⁷ In 2025, there were 2,546 recorded incidents of

violence and obstruction of healthcare across 33 countries, with hospitals damaged in 790 incidents and 455 health workers killed.⁸ The UN reported high levels of physical damage to civilian infrastructure in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine and Yemen.⁹ By the end of 2025, almost 80% of structures in Gaza were reportedly damaged or destroyed¹⁰ and an estimated 96% of cropland was damaged and inaccessible.¹¹ One local authority representative in Gaza told us:

'Nowhere was protected – not homes, not hospitals, not shelters.'

Trends in weapon use in this period meant more civilians needed protection in conflict but it was harder for humanitarian actors to access them safely. The

ⁱ ACLED is an independent global monitor that collects, analyses and maps data on conflict and protest (see <https://acleddata.com/about-acleddata/>).



escalating use of armed drones by combatants increasingly caused harm to aid structures, healthcare and civilians.¹² Growing use of artificial intelligence to inform weapon targets heightened risks to civilians and raised ethical concerns for human accountability over life-and-death decisions.¹³ Overt and covert flows of vast amounts of weapons – including to Israel and OPT, Mali, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen – continued to fuel war and violence.¹⁴

Several European countries withdrew from the Mine Ban Treaty, setting a dangerous precedent and raising long-term protection concerns for civilians.¹⁵ The use of anti-personnel mines was reported in Colombia, India, Myanmar, Ukraine and the Sahel region.¹⁶ As well as the use of indiscriminate weapons, combatant targeting of explosive weapons in cities and populated areas was a leading cause of harm to civilians in 2025.¹⁷ Combatant use of explosive weapons reportedly caused high civilian fatalities in DRC, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, Sudan, Ukraine, Yemen and OPT.¹⁸ Attacks on population centres in the war started by the United States and Israel with Iran in early 2026 suggested that such trends may continue beyond the study period.

Despite the creation of the UN Framework for the Prevention of Conflict-related Sexual Violence in 2022, sexual violence was used as a weapon of war in multiple conflicts, with reporting rates in conflict zones rising by over a quarter between 2023 and 2024.¹⁹ The UN reported over 9,300 cases of conflict-related sexual violence in 2025, with high rates in Colombia, DRC, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, OPT, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen. Women and girls were the victims in 95% of these cases,²⁰ although men and boys were reportedly subject to rape and sexual torture, especially in detention.²¹ As discussed in [Chapter 3.3](#), these high protection needs came at a time when funding and the presence of international protection resources were increasingly under threat.

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Violations of the 2018 UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2417 were flagged in the 2022 SOHS and these increased in the 2022–25 period. Parties to conflict deliberately blockaded and sieged population centres. The world's largest hunger crisis took place in Sudan, with famine conditions reported in El Fasher and Kadugli, cities besieged by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).²² In August 2025, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) confirmed a famine in Gaza, caused by Israel's blockade of food supplies.²³ This affected more than half a million people,²⁴ and by September 2025 the Gaza Health



Ministry estimated that starvation had killed at least 440 people.²⁵ [Chapter 2.1](#) describes the challenges humanitarian workers faced in addressing hunger under politically imposed constraints.



In a chilling shift from the last SOHS period, violations of IHL went as far as genocide



In a chilling shift from the last SOHS period, violations of IHL went as far as genocide. In September 2025, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel, declared a genocide in Gaza perpetrated by the State of Israel.²⁶ By January 2026, the Gaza Health Ministry estimated that at

least 71,662 people had been killed since 7 October 2023, with 488 killed since the ceasefire declaration in October 2025 and potentially another 10,000 people missing, according to the National Committee for Missing Persons.²⁷ *The Lancet* found that 42,200 women, children and elderly people were killed in the first 16 months of the war.²⁸ Israeli violence and illegal settlements expanded in the West Bank throughout the period.²⁹

In Sudan in late 2025, a team at Yale University found satellite evidence indicating that the RSF may have disposed of thousands of bodies around El Fasher,³⁰ and UN investigations into violence by the RSF found ‘hallmarks of genocide’ in early 2026.³¹ The UN reported that, following 18 months of sustained siege of El Fasher, the RSF offensive between 24 and 30 October 2025 killed over 6,000 people in the first three days, and it found widespread use of rape – including gang rape – as a weapon.³²

The deadly constraints of the humanitarian space

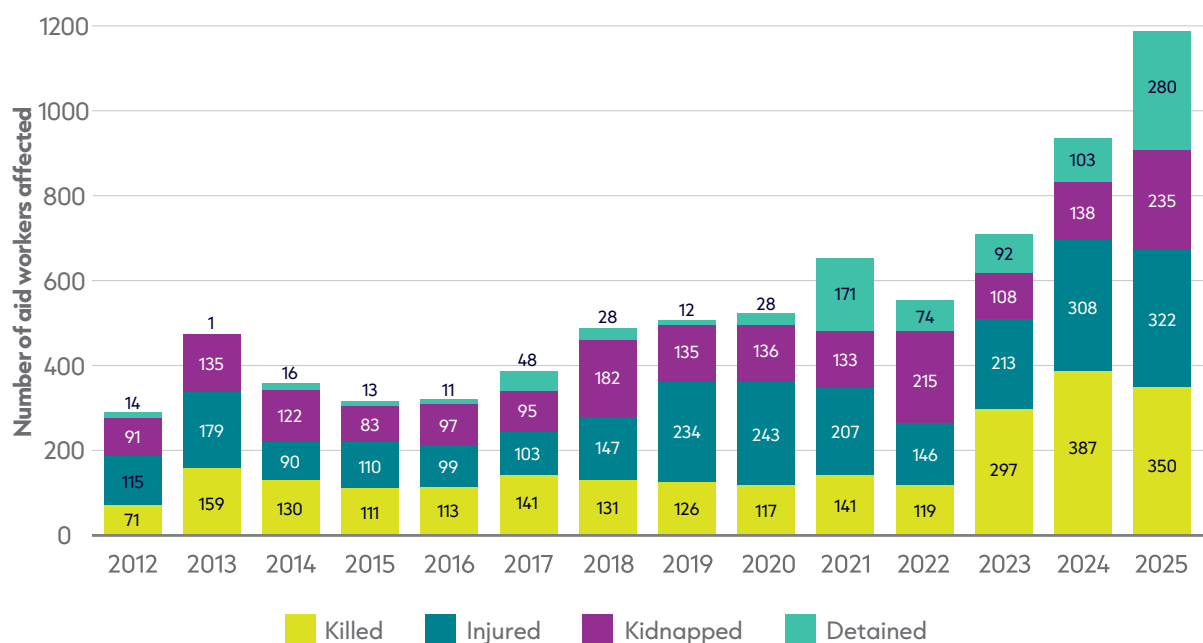
The changing conflict environment and IHL violations also threatened the safety of humanitarian staff. In addition to weapons threats, growing use of digital technology and artificial intelligence fuelled the widespread sharing of harmful information about humanitarian assistance, which contributed to the insecurity of humanitarian personnel, vehicles and offices.³³ Surveyed practitioners cited insecurity as the top obstacle to accessing all populations in need;ⁱⁱ 48% told us that humanitarian space had declined in their operating contexts between 2022 and 2025, while only 29% had seen an improvement.



48% of aid practitioners said humanitarian space had declined in their operating contexts between 2022 and 2025



ii 45.84% chose insecurity in the form of active fighting or attacks on aid operations.

Figure 3.1: Number of affected aid workers by incident outcome, 2012–2025

Source: AWSD (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Notes: Data on detentions is less complete for earlier years.



These concerns were reflected in the distressing growth in attacks on aid workers and resultant deaths. The Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD)ⁱⁱⁱ recorded 1,187 aid workers affected by major security incidents from 712 incidents in 2025: a record high. Of these, 350 aid workers were killed. Deaths peaked at 387 people in 2024 – nearly three times as many as in 2014. Between 2012 and 2025, annual fatality rates grew on average by 22%. They rose from 9.5 deaths per 100,000 aid workers in 2012 to 54.6 deaths per 100,000 aid workers in 2025.



National staff continued to comprise the highest percentage of aid-worker victims of violence and detention

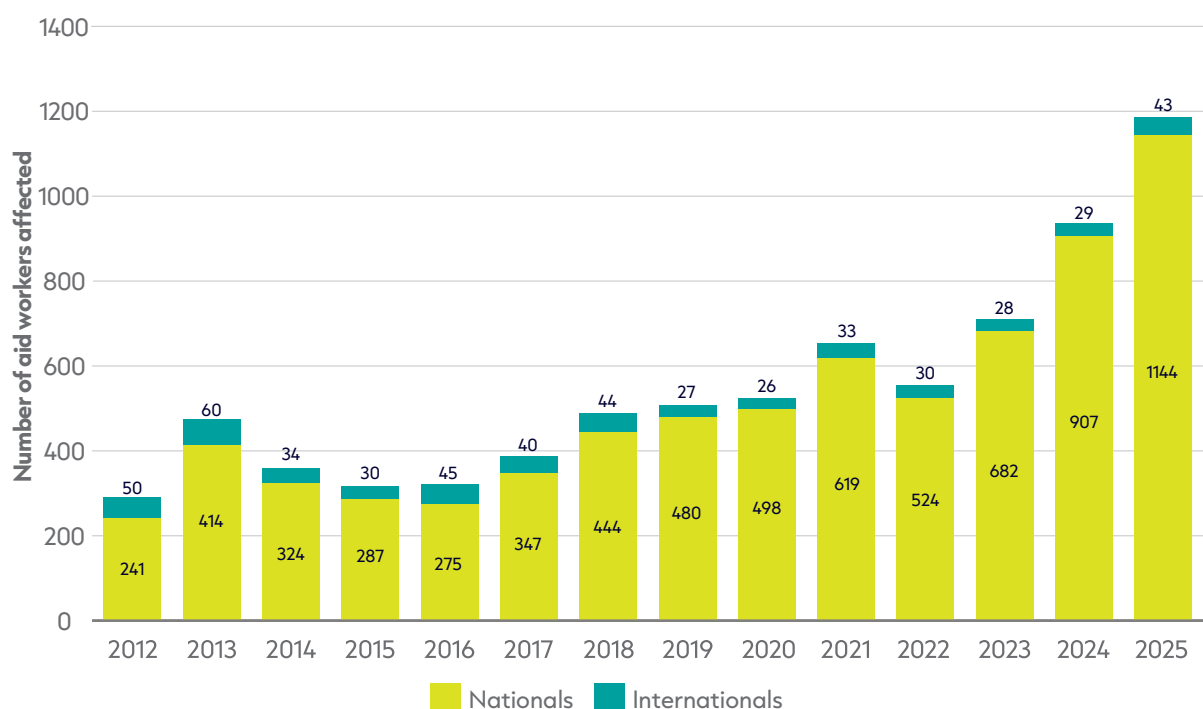
National staff continued to comprise the highest percentage of aid-worker victims of violence and detention: accounting for 96% in 2025 and a high of 97% in 2024. Fatality rates for national staff were vastly higher than for international staff in 2025: 58.1 deaths per 100,000 national staff compared to 2.5 deaths per 100,000 international staff. All but one of the 350 aid workers killed in 2025 were national staff.

ⁱⁱⁱ See <https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/>.



Between 2021 and 2025 there was a sharp rise in the number of national NGO staff who experienced major security incidents (396 in 2025). UN staff also constituted a high number of affected staff in 2025 (364), and the majority of those were national staff of UN agencies, including casualties in Gaza and staff detained in Yemen. Several senior humanitarian security experts we spoke to raised concerns that growing insecurity and funding cuts could exacerbate a trend of international humanitarian organisations working in more secure areas, placing even higher risk burdens on national and local actors to reach people in need of assistance in less secure settings.

Figure 3.2: National and international aid workers affected by major security incidents, 2012–2025



Source: AWSD (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Notes: Data on detentions is less complete for earlier years.



Both the means and perpetrators of attacks shifted in this period. Aerial bombardment became both increasingly common and the leading cause of fatalities over 2023–25. Aerial attacks mainly took place in Gaza, Lebanon and Ukraine and Sudan, reflecting the intensity of state-conducted military operations and deterioration in IHL compliance.³⁴

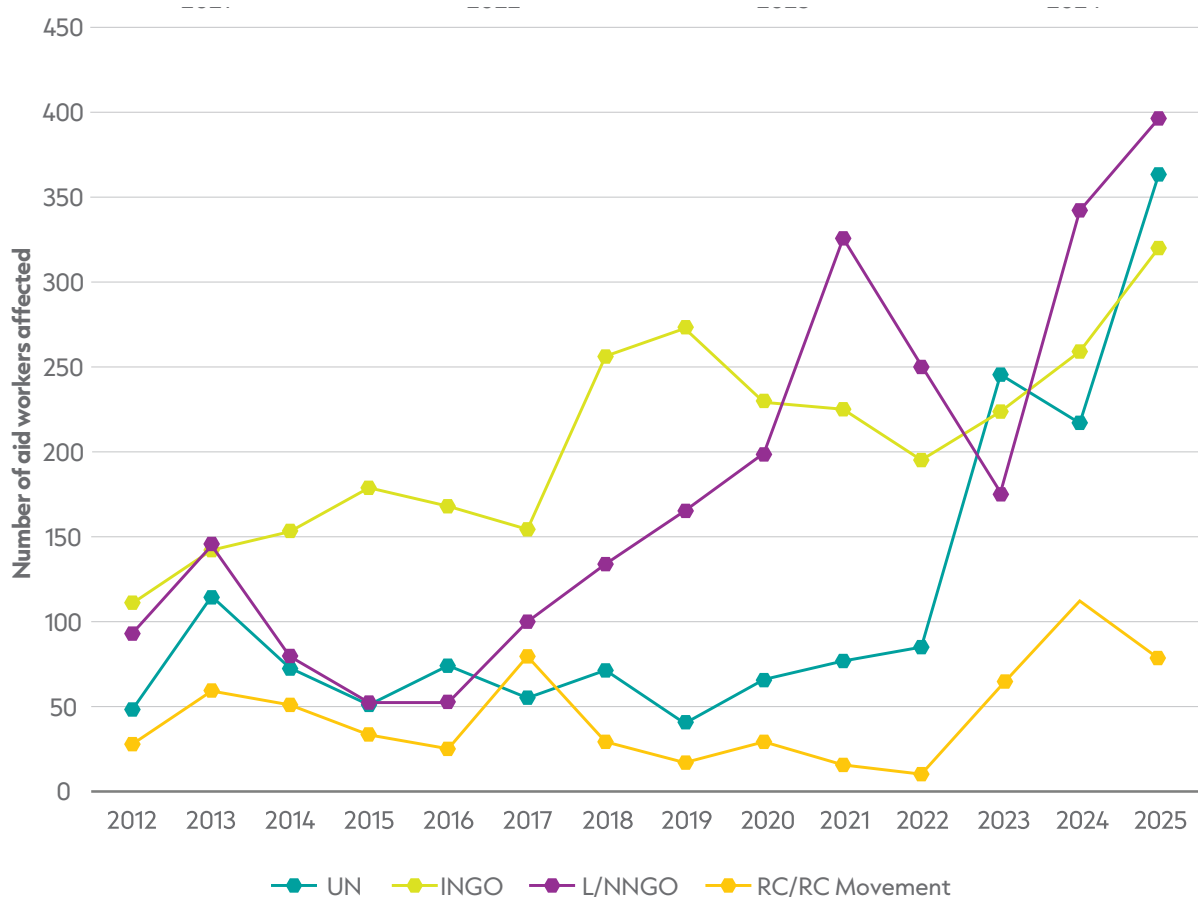
In contrast to the last SOHS period, state actors^{iv} rather than non-state armed groups became the main perpetrators of attacks on aid workers. They also committed 64% of incidents of violence and obstruction of healthcare in 2025, reflecting the scale of state military operations in populated areas,

^{iv} Including national militaries, host-government authorities, police and paramilitary forces.

particularly in Myanmar, OPT, Sudan and Ukraine.³⁵ Beyond direct violence, state actors increasingly deployed detention and administrative obstruction as tools of interference and control, with 280 aid-worker detentions recorded in 2025. In Yemen, Houthi authorities conducted systematic detention campaigns, targeting humanitarian staff at their workplaces.³⁶ Detention by state actors created new legal and diplomatic challenges for humanitarian organisations, whose protocols were developed for kidnapping by armed groups, requiring new skills and shared learning across organisations. Kidnapping remained, however, a key challenge: the number of kidnappings rose steeply from 138 in 2024 to 235 in 2025.

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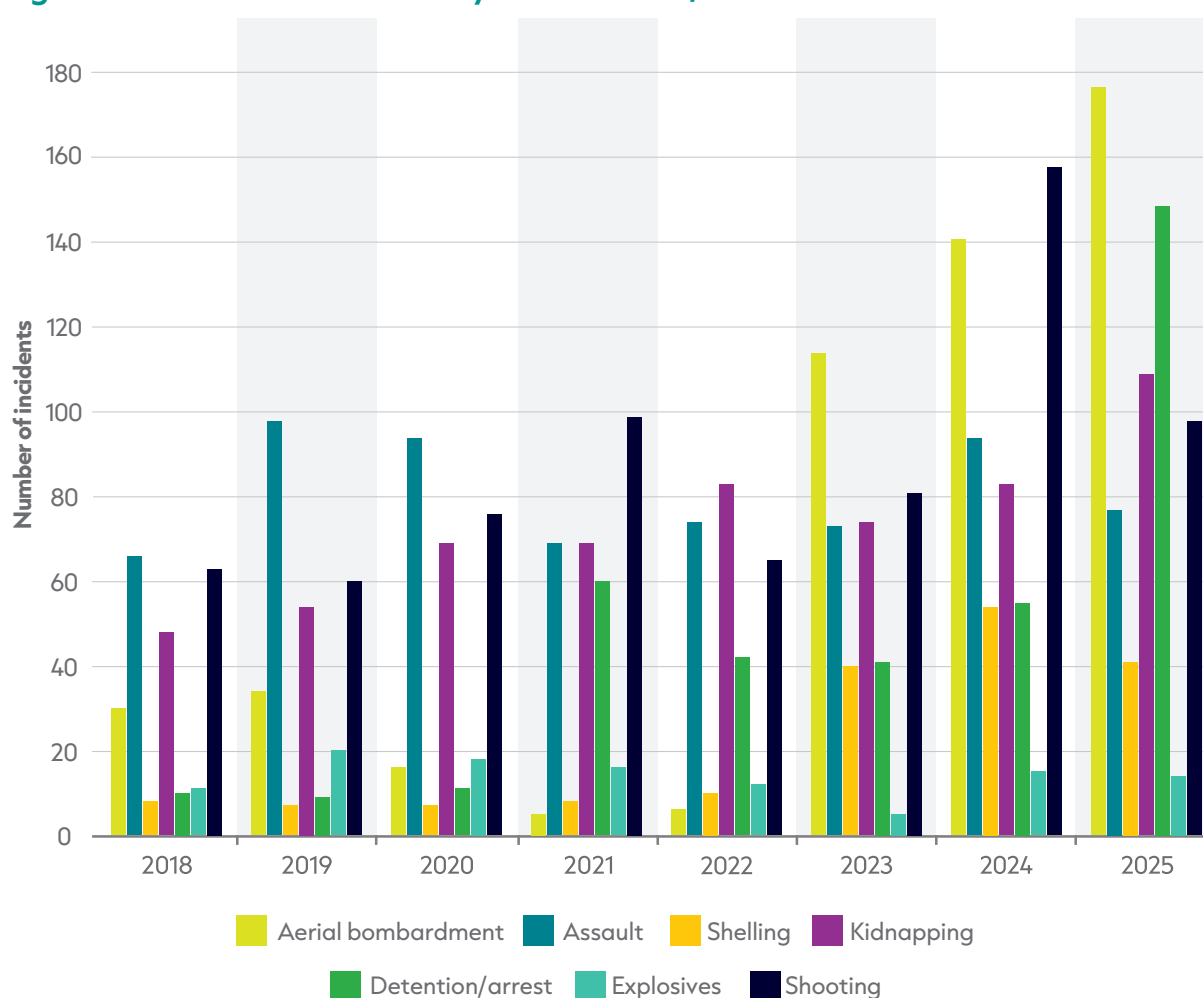
Figure 3.3: Affiliation of aid workers affected by major security incidents, 2012–2025



Source: AWSD (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Notes: INGO = international NGO; L/NNGO = Local and national NGO; RC/RC = Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Data on detentions is less complete for earlier years.

Figure 3.4: Number of incidents by known means, 2018–2025



Source: AWSD (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Notes: Explosives includes landmines; stationary, and vehicle- and body-borne improvised explosive devices (IEDs), grenades, shelling and complex attacks. Data on detentions is less complete for earlier years. Assault includes bodily assault and rape.

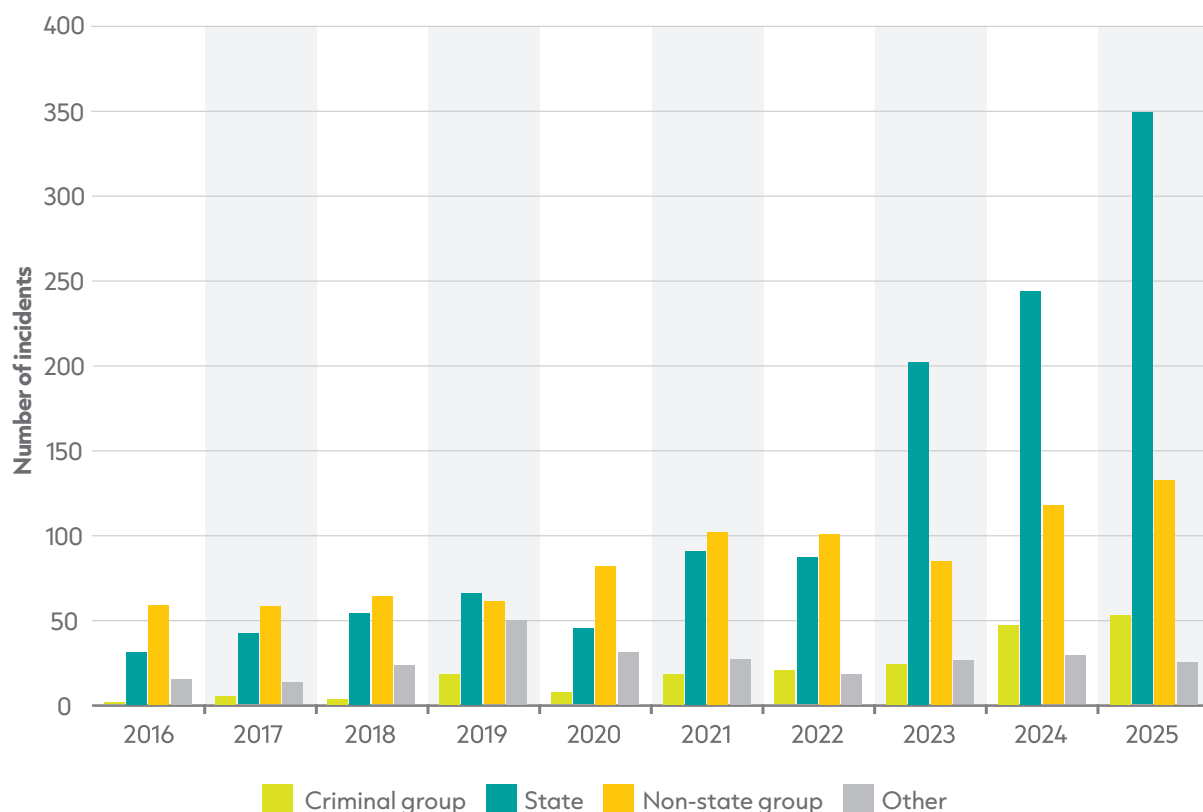


State-actor violence was also reflected in continued deconfliction failures, where military attacks struck aid actors, movements and facilities, despite formal notification or clearly visible markings of their humanitarian status. Between 2012 and 2025, the AWSD recorded 521 'deconflicted' incidents in which aid workers were injured or killed, 162 of which occurred in 2025 alone.^v One aid worker in Gaza told us:



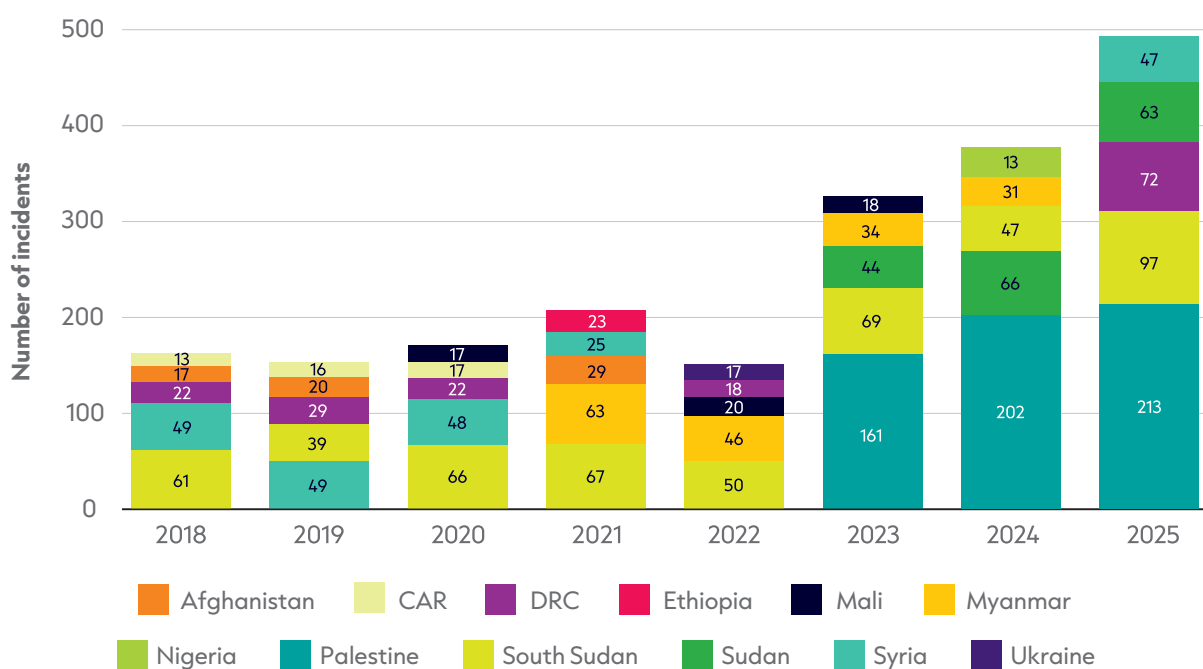
'After coordinating with the Red Cross to retrieve bodies, even though they had sent them our names and photos, the ambulance was struck as soon as we arrived, before we could begin. One of my colleagues was killed. Personally, I survived only by curling up beside the ambulance because of my small frame, staying hidden until the planes left – and then I ran for my life.'

^v Based on AWSD data (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Figure 3.5: Known perpetrators of incidents against aid workers, 2016–2025

Source: AWSD (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Notes: Data on detentions is less complete for earlier years.

**Figure 3.6: Contexts with highest number of major security incidents involving aid workers, 2018–2025**

Source: AWSD (www.aidworkersecurity.org).

Notes: Data on detentions is less complete for earlier years.



There were some significant shifts in the most dangerous contexts for aid workers since the last SOHS period.^{vi} Gaza became the deadliest operating context: 186 aid workers were killed in 2025 alone, with a total of 545 deaths between October 2023 and December 2025.^{vii} From L/NNGOs to the private sector, and from volunteers to paid staff, the aid workers we interviewed in Gaza told the same deadly story:

Gaza became the deadliest operating context with 545 aid workers killed between October 2023 and December 2025



'I had about 10 young people martyred.'



'We had 58 martyrs from the crews without counting injuries.'



'We lost 240 of our employees. These are the ones for whom we managed to obtain information, but I believe the number is much higher.'

Sudan recorded the second highest number of aid workers affected in 2025, with 147 affected and 71 killed. Across the study period, other high-incident contexts included DRC, South Sudan, Yemen, Ukraine, and Myanmar.^{viii}

Beyond the physical toll of violence, these conditions reduced humanitarian mobility and negatively affected the mental health of national and international humanitarian staff. One Palestinian aid worker in Gaza told us:



'UN institutions were not spared, schools were not spared and staff members of UN agencies were not spared. So how can I protect civilians when I cannot even protect myself?'

Under these circumstances, it is little wonder that aid practitioners reported that their biggest concerns about working conditions in this period were safety risks, excessive work and burnout – a harmful combination. In Myanmar, an aid worker said:



'Many aid agencies were forced to suspend ... due to security concerns, staff relocation and closure of field offices ... We were constantly worried about the risk of sudden fighting or crossfire during field visits.'

A local authority representative in Gaza said:



'Every kilometre feels like crossing a frontline.'

vi In 2022 SOHS, the top-10 most dangerous contexts for the whole period were: South Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Mali, Yemen, Sudan, Nigeria, DRC, CAR and Somali.

vii AWSD estimates.

viii Based on AWSD data (www.aidworkersecurity.org).



Improving aid-worker security

In response to growing threats facing staff in this period, efforts were made to improve security at policy and implementation levels. Multidonor advocacy efforts influenced states to adopt UNSC Resolution 2730 in May 2024 to protect humanitarian personnel, premises and assets.³⁷ While this drew international attention to the problem, greater practical upholding of the Resolution was sorely needed. [Chapter 3.3](#) describes some of the nascent steps different humanitarian actors took to increase humanitarian diplomacy and IHL accountability efforts. As a local authority representative in Gaza cautioned:



'If the Red Cross is not respected in Gaza, then the whole humanitarian order is at risk. What happens here reverberates far beyond these borders. Leaders must act as if Gaza is a precedent, not an exception.'

To mitigate the increased dangers facing aid workers, humanitarians made some attempts to strengthen their practical security capacities but faced several barriers. Key capacity challenges included the changing nature of threats, funding cuts and risk transfer to local organisations. Research highlighted that humanitarian actors struggled to keep up with evolving technology and weapons, such as drone deconfliction, cyber threats and disinformation.³⁸ Some donors responded by investing more in research on protection from evolving threats. Insecurity Insight provided guidance on how aid workers and organisations could mitigate risks associated with drones,³⁹ and the Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) sought to help its members navigate the changing environment and improve engagement with private-sector security actors. As discussed in [Chapter 3.3](#), alongside technical challenges, this engagement sometimes raised challenges with regards to ethics and humanitarian principles.

The closure of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) impacted security: experienced USAID security staff were lost, partner-liaison security offices were closed and funding to security-enabling structures fell significantly. For example, the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) lost approximately 37% of its funding⁴⁰ and US funding to the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) was projected to fall from US\$20 million annually to US\$1 million.⁴¹ Reduced USAID support affected several other structures, including the AWSD, GISF and Insecurity Insight. While several donors – such as the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and IrishAid – told us of their continued commitments to funding the system's security-enabling



organisations and structures, security experts raised concerns about the overall loss of security data and professional expertise at a time of high insecurity. Beyond dedicated enabling structures, the *2025 Aid Worker Security Report* indicated losses among individual organisations: 'Every organisation interviewed reported cutting security positions, and at least one lost the entire regional layer of its global security risk management team'.⁴²

In the face of funding cuts, several interviewees suggested that efficiencies could be gained through greater collaboration between individual organisations on shared security services. But they recognised that more work needed to be done around allocating responsibility and 'swallowing institutional egos'. Cuts induced losses of INSO's in-person training programmes and free training for L/NNGOs.⁴³ Security experts indicated this as one gap that could be potentially filled by a centralised training service beyond UNDSS (which primarily served UN staff), while research by the Centre on Armed Groups identified other promising practices in a constrained funding environment. One option was to work more with national NGO forums and L/NNGOs in area-based security coordination to support contextualised approaches.⁴⁴

However, some interviewees expressed concerns that relying on L/NNGOs or civil society networks, in the absence of strengthening their security infrastructure, could just transfer more risk. Indeed, despite the disproportionate risk to national staff, security for L/NNGO staff remained limited.⁴⁵

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There were some pockets of progress: INTERSOS and partners launched a project to support civil society actors on security risk management in the Sahel;⁴⁶ FCDO and the Nonviolent Peaceforce supported the Haven Consortium in Ukraine with analysis, helmets and flak jackets for local organisations and their volunteers;⁴⁷ and several donors, such as Belgium, the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), FCDO and IrishAid, encouraged intermediary partners to pass on security funds to L/NNGOs or include them as direct programme costs (although one donor reported that partners did not always take up these opportunities).

Interviewees also reported that donors and agencies were increasingly willing to provide insurance if local responders were injured or killed. For example, FCDO and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) explored duty-



of-care packages for Ukrainian local staff, DG ECHO's Protect Aid Workers mechanism allowed local actors to apply for grants and legal support, and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement ran benevolent funds for staff. Several international interviewees noted greatest movement on these issues in Ukraine – and, to some extent, with Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan – but without broader expansion to local partners working in other insecure contexts.

Accountability for IHL violations

The protective promise of IHL was brought into question by widespread violations, broad interpretations and a lack of accountability for perpetrators.⁴⁸ A 2025 report from the UN Secretary-General declared that: 'Parties have also distorted the rules of war to the point of justifying immense civilian harm instead of minimizing it ... States and other actors assert which attacks are lawful or unlawful not on the basis of detailed evidence or formal legal judgements but on the basis of whether the party in question was an adversary or not.'⁴⁹

Multilateral structures struggled to curb these multiple attacks on IHL. Key UNSC votes were blocked by permanent members with competing interests, preventing action to reduce suffering in Gaza, Syria and Ukraine.⁵⁰ International courts took some concrete steps:⁵¹ the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Israeli and Hamas officials for crimes against humanity and war crimes, and the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion that Israel's presence in OPT was illegal and ordered measures to prevent genocide.⁵² However, enacting accountability largely depended on UN member states, who demonstrated limited ability – and perhaps will – to hold perpetrators to account. For example, civil society actors criticised the UK Government for meeting with the Israeli President in 2025 amid calls to uphold the arrest warrant against him,⁵³ and several Western states continued to sell weapons to Israel.



IHL remained an important protective tool but accountability for violations was often a missing lever



Despite widespread challenges in this period, key sector publications and multiple senior humanitarians interviewed for this 2026 SOHS underscored that IHL remained an important protective tool – but that UN member states, plus other actors with the power to influence parties to conflict, must promote respect for IHL as a pressing future priority. Accountability for violations was often a missing lever.⁵⁴



Conclusion

The increase in large-scale armed conflict and attacks on IHL, by both state and non-state actors, increased protection risks for people affected by crisis in this period. Record numbers of attacks against and deaths among aid workers – of which state actors became the gravest perpetrators – made the operating environment for humanitarians markedly more dangerous. National staff consistently paid the heaviest price for attempting to do their job in increasingly dangerous conditions. The humanitarian system recognised the necessity to adapt its security approaches to meet the needs of a changing environment, but progress was hindered by funding cuts as well as a lack of scaling of nascent efforts to invest in local partners' security. Discussions around shared security services and strengthening the role of national NGO forums presented some options to better protect aid workers in financially constrained times. Beyond humanitarian organisations' role in mitigating risks, the period underscored the need for greater political will among UN member states to respect IHL and hold violators accountable. As one humanitarian leader said:



'I think we have to be a little bit more than sad. We have to focus in on its accountability.'



ENDNOTES

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