

Disaster and Mental Health: The Palestinian experience

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Background:

The Middle East conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis is a deadly battle between two victims. The Israelis, survivors of a long history of persecution and discrimination, are still bearing the scars of victimization. They are trapped in their collective memories of brutal suffering, which culminated in the horrors of the Holocaust. In their attempt to escape their history and to create a better future, they were led by the Zionist movement to establish a Jewish home and a Jewish nation. Their choice was the Biblical land of Palestine and their victims were to become the Palestinians.

The modern Palestinian tragedy goes back to the late part of the 19th century when the Zionist movement was created in the wake of nationalism which spread in Europe. Zionism's declared goal was to fulfill the dream of establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The British colonial government which was mandated over Palestine responded favorably by issuing the Balfour declaration in 1917.

In the course of their modern history, the Palestinians have found themselves becoming the Jews of the Middle East. They suffer persecution and discrimination in every corner and most painfully in their own country. Their uprooting in 1948 from their homes and villages in Palestine has left an inner focus of fear and helplessness. Victims of a grand scheme of colonial Zionism and British imperialism, they suddenly found themselves in refugee camps both inside their country and in the neighboring Arab countries.

In the first few years of their catastrophe they were bewildered, unable to comprehend why they had to pay the price for the European persecution of the Jews and why they were not allowed to return home. Now, many years later, their homes are occupied by Russian and Polish Jews. More baffling to the Palestinians were the many occasions when the Security Council of the United Nations passed resolution after resolution demanding their repatriation, to be met with Israel's flat refusal. As if to make the point more clearly, Israel had passed the "law of return" allowing Jews from any part of the world to "return" Gradually, the Palestinians realized that it was because of their backwardness, weakness and ignorance that the "civilized" Western world was able to exploit them. The aim of every father thereafter was to educate his children to the highest level.

In twenty years after their uprooting many Palestinians became University graduates and were in every university. They had some pride. Some of the educated people formed the resistance movement. They believed that the Arab countries would never fight Israel, and that we had to force them to fight. Fatah with Yasser Arafat was born. They forced the Arabs to fight by inviting Israel to attack Egypt in 1967. In the course of six days the Arabs were

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defeated again but worse. This time Palestinians lost Gaza and the West Bank, Egypt lost Sinai, and Syria lost the Golan. In a sudden stroke of fate Palestinians had to live under military occupation since then. In 1987 a Popular uprising erupted in the West Bank and Gaza Strip against the Israeli occupation. This uprising was to be known as the “Intifada”, and children who were in the forefront were given the name of “children of the stone.”

In 1993 the Oslo agreement was signed at the white house between Israel and the Palestine liberation organization (PLO). The Palestinian Authority was born and hope was spreading that peace was coming. Political development however didn’t lead to peace. Failure of peace talks, diminished hope and the failure of the PA to respect the rule of law lead to a second upheaval. In September 2000 a new uprising was ignited following the infamous Sharon visit the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The Al Aqsa Intifada was from its first days a military confrontation between Palestinian militants and the Israeli Army. Thousands were killed, many more thousands injured.

Palestinian radical groups in their despair and in defiance used suicide bombing against civilians in Israel. The whole area became engulfed with violence, hatred and tribal revenge with devastating effects on both people.

In June 2002, Israel began implementing the next stage of its expansionist and repressive program by building a Wall inside the West Bank that would run at least the West Bank’s entire length. Not surprisingly, the path of the ever-winding Wall would follow, consistently, the logic of land confiscating and control, including the annexation of settlements and the caging off of built-up, Palestinian areas. Contrary to worldwide news reports, the Wall (also referred to as the “fence”, “separation barrier”, and particularly deceptively the “security fence”) will not mark the 1967 border, also known as the Green line. The Wall is in fact a major land grab and a sealing of the fate of the Occupied Territories and of Palestine.

The state of mental health in Palestine is bound up in a combination of factors so interlinked that it is difficult to consider their effects separately. Therefore, they remain indivisible when their impact on the human psyche, on individual lives and on the community as a whole is considered. Behind the specific traumatic upheavals of the past decades (1948 uprooting, 1967 War, Occupation, the first Intifada, Al-Aqsa Intifada, etc.) lies the amalgamation of the stressors, frustrations and humiliations present in everyday life in Gaza and the effect that this constant tension and frustration has had on the mental health of its population.

One old Palestinian refugee woman described her dramatic experiences in this way:

When I returned to my home one evening, I found it destroyed. The furniture was scattered and broken. I began to weep. At that moment I began to remember the time when we were uprooted from our country, Palestine. We settled in the Khan Yunis refugee camp for 35 years. Then we left the camp to live here in the El Ammal settlement until our home was destroyed. When the soldiers imposed the curfew I didn't expect them to demolish our home. Their motive was revenge. Whenever we achieve a step of progress, Israeli forces us to go back.

Saida 60-years women, Gaza

This disaster of uprooting left strong influence on the Palestinian community and it is known from the literature that traumatic events are harmful for the development of the individual. It has been suggested frequently that severe disturbances of the ‘normal’ development during

childhood will result in psychopathology in adulthood or at least that the quality of life in adulthood is treated (Freud and Burlingham 1943; Dunsdon 1941; Brander 1941; Fraser 1974).

For this reason it is important, when exploring the impact of specific types of human rights abuses on victims and on the Palestinian society, always to take into consideration the global context in which they are occurring and to which they are adding yet another element of suffering. It follows, naturally, that any intervention designed to improve mental health, and to prevent further human rights abuses, must acknowledge and incorporate the significance of the intertwined elements of past and present experience, as well as attitudes towards the future. Even the impact of the Peace Process on Palestinians cannot be comprehended without understanding the initial meaning of the Oslo Agreement itself and what it represented. In turn, this cannot be understood without a clear picture of what the first Intifada (1987-1994) as well as Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000), meant to this society, which itself cannot be understood without a clear conception of life under occupation.

In the literature the recovery of trauma has always been described from a protective and supportive perspective. In the Gaza situation the whole community, even the traditional sources of protection (e.g. parental authority) had been undermined. It is unknown how a recovery process develops under these circumstances.

The mean age of the population of Gaza is low compared with countries in the west, this means that Gaza has a relative great number of young individuals (age < 20 = 60%) (Okasha 1990). It is unknown what the long-term consequences are for the development of an individual when a whole generation has been traumatized.

Fourthly, in the first Intifada, children and adolescents were *actors*, and it is especially this fact which makes the situation of the Gaza community different from combat situations in the West.

In facing and confronting the repeated and on going various forms of trauma and violence, Palestinians were to resort to the basic security structures which have helped them historically to survive. The family cohesion, tribal structure, and a high degree of political involvement have helped the population adaptive mechanisms and its ability for resilience. In recent years the rise of Islam as a political movement of resistance has further sharpened their resolve although it has politically radicalized increasing segments of the population.

It is a tragic fact that children have become laboratories for the study of the relationship between trauma and violence, conflict, and children's well being during war. Wars and battles have been fought without interruption in the region for fifty years. None of these wars, however, have brought a solution to the conflict between Jews and Arabs.

Since the war area is small it is difficult to protect children from sights of destruction or protect them from the dangers of war and insecurity. Many of these children have taken part in their national struggle. Even if they were not actively fighting on the streets, as so may were, they still could not help but experience the national struggle on an emotional level. The atmosphere of insecurity, danger, violence, and hostility that prevailed during the two Intifada inevitably left scars on the mental health of the Palestinians children.

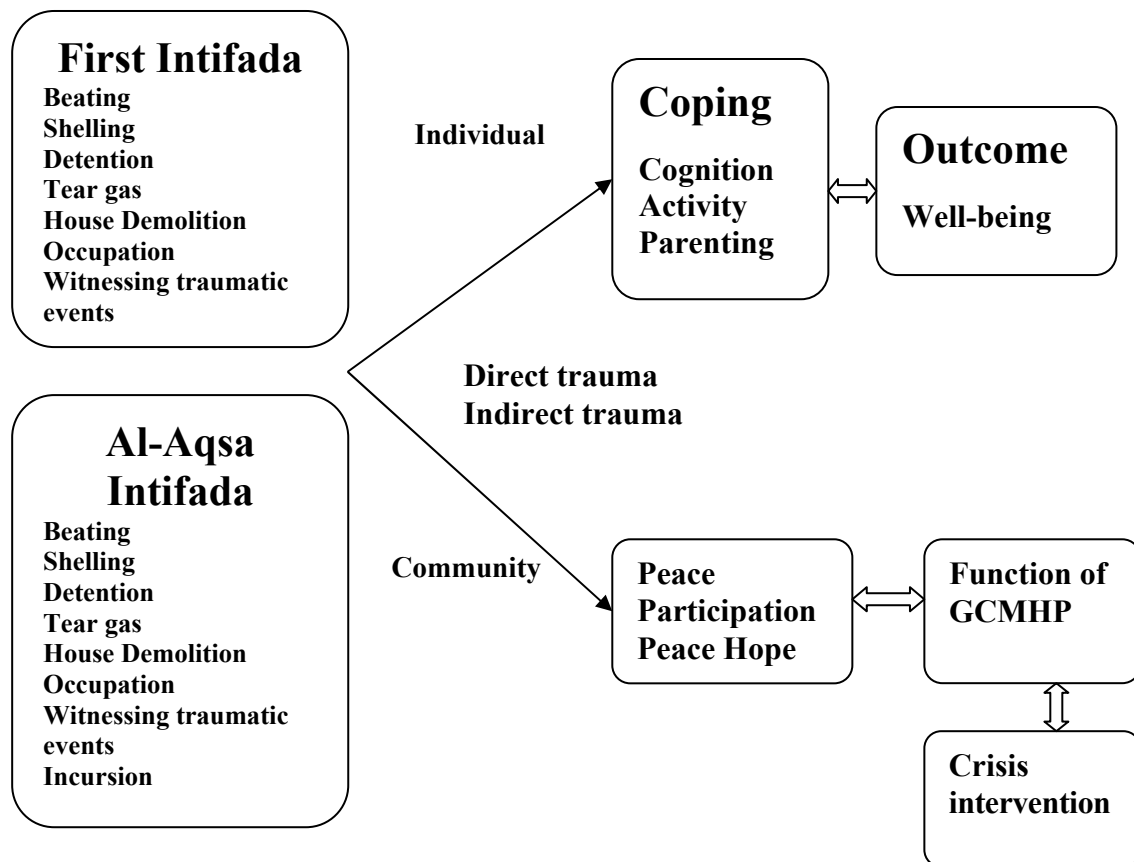
In (Fig. 1) the concept of 'trauma' may be defined differently than it is in literature dealing with other contexts. Trauma in the Gaza situation is on-going and is both direct and indirect. Direct trauma refers to the more traditional definition of the concept, and in the Gaza

situation, it refers to the moments of organized violence during the first and present Intifada. In principle, but not necessarily, direct trauma refers to an experience in the past. Indirect trauma refers to the long-term consequences of the direct trauma and to the specific context that is defined by the direct trauma. The consequences of indirect trauma other than direct trauma are difficult to specify in terms of causality. It may well be that indirect trauma is more important as a mediator than as a cause of pathological stress reactions. In principle, indirect trauma refers to both the past and actual circumstances.

Due to the difficulties in conducting nation wide research and service projects in the West bank and Gaza Strip, we in the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme have focused on the population of Gaza. The results of our work however could also be applied to the Palestinians living in the West Bank since both populations live under similar conditions and share the same cultural and socio economic life.

Figure 1

History of Uprooting



LIFE UNDER ISRAELI OCCUPATION

Since the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in June 1967, life for the Palestinians has been characterized by multiple social problems.

Israeli policies in the occupied territories are condemned worldwide as well as inside Israel mainly because they ignore the basic human rights of Palestinians, and because Israel continues to build Jewish Settlements in the West Bank and in Gaza. The record of human rights abuse by the Israeli occupation authorities was monitored by Palestinian, Israeli and international organizations including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Israeli Physicians for Human Rights (PHR-Israel) Israeli Campaign against torture, Palestinian center for human rights, and the independent commission for citizens rights.

From the early days of the Occupation, Israeli intentions were made clear; to keep the land and to exploit the Palestinian work force. By military orders the Israelis curbed all forms of freedom to ensure a tight grip on the Palestinians. All expressions of Palestinian identity, even singing for Palestine, waving a flag or forming political parties were considered anti-state offences. Traveling, meeting or forming professional syndicates were only allowed by military orders. Thousands of Palestinians were not permitted to be united with their families,

while land was continuously confiscated to build settlements for Israeli Jews. Humiliation, harassment and discrimination were the official undeclared policies.

In the first five years of the Occupation the Palestinians put up a stiff resistance and took to armed struggle, but at a heavy price. Throughout the Occupation approximately 400,000 people have been detained and the majority of them tortured.

Over the years the Israeli policies have created a culture of fear and paranoia with a violent projection of aggression, while keeping an inner image of Jews as victims. Their paranoia was continuously nourished by the surrounding Arab demagogic leaders who vowed impotently to throw the Jews into the sea.

The Palestinians on the other hand are physically dispersed in exile and are emotionally traumatized. Their feeling of victimization is deep. Their experience of trauma is overwhelming and their inner psyche has been badly injured. Their mood therefore is greatly sensitive, quickly swayed to extremes and their reactions rapidly swing between euphoria and despair. They will never forget their suffering and will perhaps never forgive.

During the years of Israeli occupation, besides the denial basic human rights, harsh economic measures were taken and social and political rights were restricted. Since 1967, more than 40% of the land of Gaza has been confiscated by the Israeli occupation authorities. This land has been turned over only for the use of Jewish Israelis. Thousands landless Palestinians have been absorbed into the Israeli economy as cheap, unskilled or semiskilled laborers. Palestinian farmers who have managed to keep their land have been subjected to military restriction that control water use (Lowi, M., 1982). As a result of these and other measures, the Palestinian economy has been crippled by the Israeli occupation, and the occupied territories have become one of the Israeli's largest export markets 9for a comprehensive analysis the reader is referred to Sara Roy book "redevelopment"

Palestinians were denied freedom of speech, meeting, traveling, and publishing, and were punished for expressing their national identity in any form. Even a wearing a dress of the colors of the flag or singing a national song were consider a crime against the state (Marsella, A. etc.1994).

The Israeli policies in the occupied territories were seen as designed to force the majority of the Palestinian out, and to resettle the remainder in small enclaves surrounded by Israeli settlements.

THE FIRST INTIFADA

In December 9, 1987, the Palestinian popular uprising, the Intifada, against the Israeli military occupation opened a dramatic new chapter in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with far-reaching psychological, political, and socio-economic consequences. From the beginning, children were active in the core events of the Intifada and came to be known as "the children of the stones." Many posters, postcards, articles and books portray images of the children of the Intifada throwing stones.

The Israeli army's response to the Intifada was to increase brutal and oppressive measures. These measures included killings, detentions without trial, demolition of homes, torture, deportation, and curfews. The Palestinian Human Rights Information Centre estimates that during the period of the first Intifada from December 9, 1987, to December 31, 1993,

Palestinians suffered 130,472 injuries and 1,282 deaths, of which 332 were deaths of children. Among victims were those who were shot, beaten, tear gassed, or burned to the extent that they are suffering from permanent disability. Approximately 57,000 Palestinians were arrested, many of whom were subjected to systematic physical and psychological torture. Records show that over 481 were deported, and 2,532 had their homes demolished. The psychosocial and financial costs for the affected families in terms of medical and psychosocial care, loss of productive time, chronic disability, loss of function, and loss of life and property are enormous (Khamis, V., 1995a).

Most children living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) have directly experienced physical or psychological violence or they may have witnessed violence directed towards their families and friends. These experiences occurred in the specific historical context of Palestine, and were resonant with the uprooting of their families from their country in 1948.

Bombing happens suddenly, without prior notice. It is this unpredictability that is considered to be the most traumatic factor for human beings. The method used by the Israeli army in shelling and demolition are psychologically devastating as the army carry out such attacks suddenly and in the middle of night or sometimes in midday, when people are engaged in their daily life.

Curfew

Curfews are considered as a collective punishment, turning every home into a prison. Under the curfews all aspects of daily life are paralyzed, the result is the total break down of normal pattern of social and the economic interactions.

One observation that helps interpret the results is that curfews create frustration, which means unpleasant emotional state resulting from a blocked goal, rather than the event itself (Atkinson, 1985). One of the main common responses to frustration is active aggression, and if the stressful condition continues, and the child is unable to cope with it, apathy may deepen into depression (Qouta, El Sarraj, 1994).

During the five years of the Intifada, the population in Gaza Strip was confined to their homes during curfews every night from 7 p.m. to 4 a.m... Many times curfews were imposed around the clock for various periods. During the Gulf war curfew was imposed for a continuous 42 days with people confined to their homes except for three hours every week.

In the study of Collective Punishments and Mental Health we tried to assess the effects of curfews on the children behavior. It was found that the curfew leads to negative psychological effects among the children, Results show that 66.1% children began to fight each other, 54% were afraid of new things, 38% started to develop aggressive behavior, 18.9% started to suffer from bed-wetting and 2.3% had speech difficulties.

Torture

Throughout the years of occupation the use of torture in Israeli interrogation centers was sanctioned by law until the high court of Justice ruled in 1999 that all forms of violence during in interrogate are unlawful.

In the first 20 years of occupation however over 400.000 Palestinians were jailed for various periods, the majority of them tortured. Methods used in torture ranged from psychological to physical and the impact on the society and individuals far reaching[•].

Parenting Style

Mental health professionals show increasing concern about developmental risks for children who fall victims to political violence and war. Family and parent-child attachment are considered important in providing a protective shield for children's psychological well-being in dangerous conditions (Freud & Burlingham, 1943; Garbarino, Kostelny & Dubrow, 1991). Researchers assume that experiences related to political violence and war constitute a serious risk for the well-functioning family (Garbarino, Kostelny, 1993; Hobfoll et. Al., 1991). War and political conflict therefore disrupt some of the basic parental functions, such as protecting children and enhancing trust in security and human virtues.

The gender of the child seems to be an important determinant of both parenting and the association between traumatic events and the quality of perceived parenting. Research confirms that parenting styles vary according to the gender of the parent as well as the gender of the child. Mother-child interactions are characterized by relatively more warmth and responsiveness than father-child interactions, whereas the latter are likely to be marked by the father's relatively greater punitive, firm, and restrictive behavior towards his children.

Palestinian families in the Gaza Strip are large, and people show strong affiliation to them. "El Hamula" (the extended family) continues to play an important protective role in modern life too. Traditionally, children submit to the authority of their parents, and older members of the family enjoy special status. The constant enemy threat and the collective trauma of losing their homeland in 1948 have increased social cohesion in Palestinian society.

However, the first Intifada created a situation that apparently shook traditional parent-child relations and family hierarchy. First, the increased influence of political parties decreased the social role of the extended family. Second, children and youths played a very active role in the national struggle. They were an essential element in the initiation, planning, and organizing of demonstrations against and confrontations with Israeli soldiers (Kuttab, 1988).

Palestinians have expressed serious concern about the future consequences of these shattered parental bonds. There is common belief that children who threw stones and fought against the occupation army also challenge their parents' authority.

Children living in conditions of political violence and war have been described as "growing up too soon", "losing their childhood", and taking political responsibilities ample maturation (Boothby, Upton, & Sultan, 1992). This development is predicting to result in negative psychological consequences (Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991).

[•] El Sarraj, Eyad, 1995, *Torture and Mental Health: a survey of the experience of Palestinians in Israeli prisons*, Torture: Human rights, medical ethics and the case of Israel, Zed Books Ltd, 165 First Avenue, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey USA.

The associations between traumatic events, children's gender and political activity, and parenting styles showed that the more the children were exposed to traumatic events, the more they perceived both their parents as strictly disciplining, rejecting, and hostile, and their mothers as more negatively evaluating. Traumatic events increased perceived parental rejection and hostility only among boys, and perceived strict discipline only among the girls. Although politically active children perceived both of their parents as more negative in general. In the families exposed to a high level of traumatic events, passive boys perceived their fathers as more rejecting and hostile than active boys did. It is suggested that mothers and fathers rear girls restrictively and with greater attention, and boys with rejection, when the family faces traumatic events. In exposed families, fathers also tend to discourage boys' political passivity and apparently encourage activity. Children who enjoyed good parenting have the ability to adapt and achieve good mental health than children whom had poor parenting (Punamaki, Qouta, El Sarraj, 1997).

Research focusing on the associations between traumatic events, children's gender and political activity, and parenting styles showed that the more the children were exposed to traumatic events, the more they perceived both their parents as strictly disciplining, rejecting, and hostile, and their mothers as more negatively evaluating (Tables 2 and 3). Traumatic events increased perceived parental rejection and hostility only among boys, and perceived strict discipline only among girls. In the families exposed to a high level of traumatic events, passive boys perceived their fathers as more rejecting and hostile than active boys did. It is suggested that mothers and fathers rear girls restrictively and with greater attention, and boys with rejection, when the family faces traumatic events. In exposed families, fathers also tend to discourage boys' political passivity and apparently encourage activity. Children who enjoyed good parenting have the ability to adapt and achieve better mental health than children who had poor parenting.

Table 1. Mothers: relation between traumatic events, child's gender and political activity, and perceived parenting styles (n=56)

Independent Variables	Strict Discipline		Intimacy and Love		Lax Control		Negative Evaluation		Rejection and Hostility	
	Beta	<i>r</i>	Beta	<i>r</i>	Beta	<i>r</i>	Beta	<i>r</i>	Beta	<i>r</i>
Traumatic Events	.14	.22	.03	.00	.07	0.4	.23	.32	.10	.23
Gender	.28	.32	.01	.02	.10	0.8	.34	.40	.32	.37
Political Activity	.01	.11	.00	.01	-1.8	-1.2	-.04	.14	0.9	.21
<i>R</i> ²	.12		.00		0.3		.21		.16	
					1.20					
F (6,56)	4.71		.01		ns.		9.06		6.72	
<i>P</i>	<0.04		ns.				<0.0001		<0.003	

Table 2. Fathers: relation between traumatic events, child's gender and political activity, and perceived parenting styles (n=56)

Independent Variables	Strict Discipline		Intimacy and Love		Lax Control		Negative Evaluation		Rejection and Hostility	
	Beta	<i>r</i>	Beta	<i>r</i>	Beta	<i>r</i>	Beta	<i>r</i>	Beta	<i>r</i>
Traumatic Events	.17	.28	.02	-.04	.15	0.1	.07	.06	.25	.31
Gender	.37	.42	.09	.05	.15	0.14	.11	.08	.40	.44
Political Activity	.00	.16	-1.0	-.08	-2.3	-1.3	-.05	-0.5	-1.3	.07
<i>R</i>²	.02		.01		0.6		.02		.24	
F (6,56)	8.90		.53		2.40		.58		11.14	
<i>P</i>	<0.0001		ns.		0.7		ns.		<0.0001	

After three years of reduced military violence, the children who had responded actively to that violence suffered less from PTSD and emotional disorders than the passive children. Conversely, in the midst of Intifada violence, these active children had showed the highest levels of psychological symptoms. The result thus confirms that children's political activity serves different mental health functions in acutely dangerous conditions than in safe ones.

Parental relationships were very important determinants of the children's post-Intifada adjustment. Results expand on the simple assumption that good and loving parenting is beneficial, and rejective and hostile parenting is harmful, by showing that it was rather the perceive discrepancy between the mothering and fathering that was malfunctioned. The children turned out to be especially vulnerable to PTSD and emotional disorders (self-reported) if they felt that their mothers showed positive, and their father's negative attitudes towards them.

Harmful effects of parental discrepancy may arise from three sets of circumstance. First, mothers may be especially attached to and protective of children who suffer from symptoms and disorders, whereas fathers may show less caring attitudes. Second, the perceived discrepancy may reveal conflict marital relations, involving a disagreement about child-rearing practices, which is turn, is associated with children's poor psychological adjustment. Third, we measure parenting, which could mean that children with severe symptoms tend to favor one parent against the other.

General research recognizes the importance of marital relationship, harmonious parenting unique mother-child and father-child relations in affecting child development.

Curfew

Another issue is that of curfew. Curfews are considered as a collective punishment, turning every home into a prison. Under the curfews all aspects of daily life are paralyzed; the result is the total breakdown of normal patterns of social and economic interactions. Curfews create frustration, and one of the main common responses to frustration is active aggression. If the stressful condition continues, and the individual is unable to cope with it, apathy may deepen into depression. During the five years of the first Intifada, the population in Gaza Strip was confined to their homes during curfews every night from 7 p.m. to 4 a.m.. Furthermore, curfews were imposed around the clock on many occasions for various periods. During the Gulf war, curfew was imposed for a continuous 42 days. In the study of Collective Punishments and Mental Health, we tried to assess the effects of curfews on the children behavior: results show that 66.1% of children began to fight each other, 54% were afraid of new things, 38% started to develop aggressive behavior, 18.9% started to suffer from bed-wetting and 2.3% had speech difficulties.

AL-AQSA INTIFADA

In September, 2000, a new Palestinian uprising began against the now 37 – years old Israeli military occupation. The immediate cause of the uprising was the visit of about then Israeli Knesset Member Ariel Sharon accompanied by over 1000 armed Israeli riot police in full riot-gear to what Jews call the Temple Mount, and what Muslims call the Noble Sanctuary (“El-Haram A-Sharif”) on which sits Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Following Friday prayers the next day, Palestinians protested the violation of their holy place, which resulted in Israeli police fatally shooting several unarmed protesters. This event provided the immediate spark for Palestinian protests throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as the name for an uprising that continues to this day - - the “Al – Aqsa Intifada.” The more distant cause for this second and more violent Intifada was the increasingly evident failure of the Oslo peace process, whose impetus, ironically, came from the first Intifada - - mainly non-violent uprising of 1987-93. Instead of a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, Oslo has brought economic de-development including high unemployment, a 50% increase in Israeli settlement building and land confiscation, and a decrease in Palestine freedom of movement and lack of civil liberties. The failure of the Palestinian authority in respecting the rule of law and building democratic institution are important factors in fuelling the Intifada.

Since the beginning of Al Aqsa Intifada over 2859 Palestinians were killed, at least 85% were civilians and 22% were children. Over 41,000 were injured, according to UNICEF 7000 of whom were children. Since the 29th of March 2002, 15,000 Palestinians have been detained, 6000 of who remains in prison and 350 Palestinian children are currently held in Israeli prisons.^{*}

As in all modern wars, the victims of the latest Middle East war are mainly civilians. Palestinian uprising and Israeli military attach to suppress are mainly civilians. We have an accumulated knowledge about the children’s responses to air raids, bombardment shelling, loss of family member and being target and witnessing killing and destruction. Children’s

www.palestinemonitor.org^{*}

responses to danger and life-threat include anxiety, somatization and withdrawal symptoms, and especially among younger children regression to the earlier stages of development and clinging to parents. Family's ties are considered one of the most important protectors of the child mental health in war conditions.

It is important to note that the atmosphere of political violence creates a state of disorganization inside the Palestinian family. Especially frightening is when parents are unable to protect their children and appear to be helpless victims in front of their children. Eight-year old Moti typifies this when he said, "*Mother, when I hear the shelling, it feels like we're going to die. Can you tell me when the shelling will be over?*" The mother lied to her son and told him that it would be safer tomorrow. But when the shelling started again, it was the mother who began to be more confused. For her, it seemed that the shelling and demolitions hinted at a specific, personal meaning that she attaches to the possible or imminent loss of their home.

Home Demolitions

Home demolitions have been one of the harshest methods of collective punishment carried out on Palestinian population. More than 5000 houses were demolished since the beginning of al Aqsa Intifada.[•]

One GCMHP research project examines the immediate effects of losing one's home and witnessing the demolition of other houses on the mental health of Palestinian adults and children. The loss group consisted of 47 adults whose homes were demolished, the witness group of 24 adults whose homes demolished and the control group of 33 adults. The groups were compared for their anxiety, depression and paranoiac symptoms. In addition 38 children in the loss group were compared for their psychological symptoms. The results (table no.3) showed that adults who were exposed to house demolition showed a higher level of anxiety depression and paranoiac symptoms than the witness and control groups. The children in the loss group showed a higher level of psychological symptoms than the children in the witness and control groups. The witness group differed from the control group in having more depression among women and more psychological symptoms among children. Women suffered more from anxiety, depression and paranoiac symptoms than men in the loss and witness groups but not in the control group (Qouta, El Sarraj, 1997).

Losing one's home means more than acute disaster for Palestinian as it evokes the memories of the traumatic experiences associated with being a refugee. In fact, the current shelling and house demolitions evoke memories associated with the loss of historic Palestine in the 1948 war, which have been a central source of fear and insecurity and deeply affect the inner layers of the Palestine psyche (El Sarraj, Tawahina, & Abu Hein, 1991). During the Intifada, Israeli army frequently used house demolitions to frighten and collectively punish the population for its resistance activities. When a family is witness to the destruction of its own home by enemy soldiers, the psychological effect is immense. The home is not only a shelter, but also the heart of family life. There are memories of joy and pain as well as attachment to familiar objects. Home is associated with feelings of security and consolation (Qouta, El Sarraj, 1997).

[•]www.palestinemonitor.org

Table 3. Psychological symptoms in children whose houses were demolished, in children witnessing the demolition of other houses and in a control group

Type of the symptom	Loss Group (n=38)	Witness Group (n=36)	Control Group (n=50)	X ² value
Dread of the army	97.4	77.8	70.0	10.63**
Lack of concentration	84.2	19.4	0.0	74.41***
Constant weeping	65.8	19.4	12.0	32.39***
Easily irritated	63.2	37.0	32.0	8.95**
Reexperiencing trauma	60.5	27.8	8.0	28.56**
Night terror	60.5	41.7	4.0	33.63***
Loss of interest	60.5	11.1	12.0	32.27***
Sleeping difficulties	57.9	16.7	6.0	32.89***
Explosive and touchy	55.3	52.0	20.0	9.98**
Clinging behavior	52.6	33.3	2.0	29.51***
Disobedience	50.0	30.6	18.0	10.27**
Afraid of going out	47.4	22.9	4.0	23.10**
Sad mood	42.1	5.6	0.0	34.13***
Aggressive behavior	42.1	16.7	16.0	9.59**
Feeling suffocation	39.5	8.3	2.0	25.28***
Bedwetting	31.6	17.1	12.0	5.44*
Social withdrawal	23.7	2.8	2.0	14.89***
Sucking thumb	21.1	5.6	2.0	10.38**
Biting nails	21.6	11.1	2.0	8.67**
Beating siblings	21.0	5.6	2.0	13.34***
Bullying peers	15.8	8.3	4.0	3.73
Eating difficulties	15.8	2.8	0.0	5.72*
Involuntary movements	15.8	5.6	6.0	3.25
Telling lies	15.8	8.3	4.0	3.73
Speech problems	10.5	2.8	2.0	3.88
Somnambulism	7.9	0.0	0.0	6.88*
Encopresis	5.3	0.0	0.0	4.55
Stealing	5.3	8.3	2.0	1.84

^a n = 124, * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 1 shows that the most common symptoms in the loss group were dread of the army (97%), diminished concentration (84%), constant weeping (55%), and re-experiencing the traumatic event (63%). The most common symptoms in the witness group of children dread of army (78%), being easily explosive and touchy (52%), and night terror (42%). The table further shows that the compared groups did not differ significantly from each other in symptoms like eating difficulties, involuntary movements, telling lies, speech problems, encopresis, and stealing ($p = ns.$). These symptoms characteristically indicates severe childhood pathology and possible personality disorders.

Demolition have meant that families are forced to live in tents or in the houses of relatives, which not only is reminiscent of the situation in 1948 but also caused many practical and social problems, and puts people in more danger. One mother in the study described this predicament in this way:

"I can't forget that day, when my husband had been injured after our home had been hit by a missile. My home is near an Israeli checkpoint and one day they started to shell our home. My husband, kids and I tried to cross the wide street, which is close to the checkpoint to another street where we would be able to escape to a safer place. I arrived at the street first with my kids and my husband was behind us. He had almost arrived at that street when a missile hit his leg, knocking him down. My husband's brothers ran to him and tried to give him some first aid. The ambulance could not get through to take him to the hospital because of the shelling. Our house is on a wide street and the checkpoint is on high ground, so the Israeli soldiers can see everyone passing in the street. Finally, one of our neighbors came with his car and took my husband to the hospital. In the hospital they had to amputate my husband's leg.

Post traumatic stress disorder in a recent research project on 944 children in Gaza, results revealed a high level of PTSD: more than a half (32.7%) of the children suffered from severe level of PTSD symptoms. The percentage corresponds with the levels of PTSD among the Cambodian (Kinzie, et al., 1996; Sack et al., 1995), and South American (Cervantes, et al., 1989) and Bosnia-Herzegovian (Smith et al., 2002) refugee children fleeing atrocities in their home countries. The level of PTSD was considerably higher than was reported among Lebanese and Israeli children, 22% (Laor et al., 1997), but lower than was reported among Iraqi children, 84% (Dyregrov et al., 1993).

There are some context-specific characteristic of the current trauma that may explain the children's high level of PTSD. First, the long duration for the conflict means more than an acute disaster for Palestinians as the children exposed to on going traumatic experiences, and that means the continuation of the stress for long periods, which damage the child psyche, and increased the rate of PTSD.

Impact of the shelling on the children and their mother.

As the "Al-Aqsa Intifada" continues into its fourth year, the Israeli army frequently shells the Palestinian Gaza Strip and West Bank. The Israeli army uses a variety of methods to shell or including tank shells, helicopter gunship, and fighter aircraft (e.g. American-made F-16's).

Results of the study "Prevalence of PTSD among Palestinian Mothers and Children Exposed to Shelling and Loss of Home" indicate that both children and their mothers are suffering from various psychological symptoms and that direct exposure to trauma as well as witnessing trauma constitutes traumatic experiences. Exposure to shelling and home demolition results in various behavioral and neurotic symptoms among children and their mother, and also leads to a high level of PTSD.

Table 4. Prevalence rate of the traumatic experiences of children and their mothers.

Direct Personal experience	Child	Mother
Shelling of the home	99.2%	99.5%
Tear-gassed	94.9%	97.5%
Severe burns	1.7%	2.5%
Shot by live bullets	.8%	4.2%
Shot by plastic bullets	4.2%	1.7%
Head injury with loss of consciousness	2.5%	2.5%
Deprivation of medical help	1.7%	2.5%
Witnessing traumatic events	Child	Mother
Saw shooting, fighting or explosion	96.6%	100%
Saw stranger being injured or killed	51.7%	62.2%
Saw friend or neighbor being injured or killed	35.6%	50.4%
Saw family member being injured	22.9%	32.2%
Saw funerals	95.8%	95.9%

Table 5. Percentages of behavioral and neurotic symptoms among Palestinian children.

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Headaches	59	49.2%
Stomach pain	31	26.1%
Depressed	62	51.7%
Bed-wetting (at night)	44	36.7%
Day-wetting	13	10.9%
Moody	95	80.5%
Crying when he goes to school	37	32.7%
Escapes from school	11	9.7%
Stammering	18	15.0%
Other speech problems	7	5.8%
Stealing	8	6.7%
Eating difficulties	63	52.5%
Sleep difficulties	51	42.5%
Restlessness	51	42.9%
Fussy	63	52.5%
Broke his possessions or broke the possessions of others	34	28.3%
Fighting with other children	55	45.8%
Not liked by others his own age	19	15.8%
Worries	75	63.6%
Doing things on his own	73	61.9%
Inability to settle down	62	52.1%
Unhappiness	70	58.8%
Tic	41	34.2%
Sucking thumb	15	12.5%

Biting nails	23	19.2%
Disobedience	76	63.3%
Hyperactive	55	46.2%
Afraid of new situations	56	47.7%
Squirmy	69	57.5%
Tells lies	28	23.3%
Bullies other children	31	25.8%

Results confirm that population of Palestinian children and their mothers have a high prevalence of both types of trauma (exposure and witnessing). The results showed that 55.1% of the children suffered from serve PTSD. The variation of the PTSD symptoms was a function of the child and the mother characteristic and the mother's responses to trauma, and only marginally the function of the level of trauma exposure. Most vulnerable for the intrusion symptoms were girls whose mothers were educated and showed a high level of PTSD-symptoms. Whereas most vulnerable for avoidance symptoms were children who personally experienced violence and whose mothers were educated and showed a high level of PTSD-symptoms. The results are discussed in the context of Middle Eastern wars negatively affecting the protective shield of family life, both by physical destruction, and compromising the parental task of protecting offspring.

Suicide Bombing

Palestinian militant groups have resorted to suicide bombing killing civilian Israelis. Suicide bombing is a complex phenomena and can be seen as a reflection of despair in one hand and a desire for defiance and revenge on the other.

One of the essential elements to understand is the tribal mentality which urges individuals to avenge defeat to the bitter end even across generations. Arabs will continue to fight forever if needed as long as their dignity was injured. People are expected and are obliged to join the struggle according to the Arab tribal code. They will only stop if the aggressor will publicly acknowledge his guilt and assumes responsibility for his aggression. Arabs will then enter the honorable *Solha* or peace. But only then.

This code of behavior preceded Islam and continues to be an essential expression of the identity of being an Arab.

The act of 'normal' suicide among Arabs is extremely rare and shameful, as it is perceived to be a form of defiance against God. But to be a martyr is highly glorified and places one on the highest level of respect, almost that of prophets. This is where the influence of the Islam is most felt through the powerful message of the Koran. Islam thus provides the vehicle for the committed to act in the deep belief that sacrificing one's self is the ultimate test of faith. More significantly Islamic teaching is clear on martyrdom; that a martyr does not die, and surely continues to live in the care of God. Moslems take that promise to heart, and literally hold to it.

Politically, suicide bombing is an act of absolute despair and a very serious stage in the perception of the Arab Israeli seemingly perpetual conflict. Citizens of any given country will join the army to defend their country. This is not so in the case of Palestinians who never possessed an army. They would have to join clandestine groups. Arabs also feel the despair because their regimes are not able or willing to win a fight with the formidable Israel, which

is unconditionally supported by the US. The road of Arabs and Palestinians to despair and to suicide killing is long. One of the serious observation is that more children are identifying with Martyrdom. In a recent GCMHP research project 34% of boys 12-14 said they considered that the best thing to do in life is to die as a martyr.

The history of Palestinians is composed of series of disasters which took place in different periods of time, with serious impact on Palestinian psyche. The mood of Palestinian people is still fluctuated between hope and despair.

In Gaza Community mental Health Programme we have embarked since 1990 on a mission to try and help as many people as we could. We have eleven community centers which provide community mental health services particularly geared to the needs of children, women and victims of torture.

We have reached around eighteen percent of the population, directly helping over fifteen thousand victims of violence and have trained hundreds of doctors, nurses and teachers in basic counseling.

In the last three years alone and through a special project of crisis intervention we have reached around 6000 people. We apply debriefing, supportive counseling, group therapy, child and family therapy and individual programs of therapy. Our team strive to reach people in the areas where Israeli army actions result in demolishing homes or killing and injuring civilians. In may occasions our teams were not able to reach the people who need services due to Israeli blockade of roads. Some areas in Gaza Strip are still unreachable by medical or other teams.

Nations are like individuals; each tries to be the master of its destiny. Like many other groups, Palestinians are victims of their history, discrimination, and persecution. Palestinians are struggling to assert their identity and to heal their injured dignity. Their suffering and forced subjugation cause more anger, hates, and distrust. Yet, the world was not responding to their crisis. Justice was being denied, and hope was being destroyed. And within this context, neither individual mental health nor regional peace could exist.

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