

November 2001
By Maria Holt

THE RIGHT OF THE CHILD DENIED PALESTINIAN CHILDREN UNDER OCCUPATION

*O [our] children,
rain of the spring, buds of hope!
you are fertile seeds in our barren life;
you are the generation that will vanquish
the defeat.¹*

Introduction

Children represent the dreams of the Palestinian community, their aspirations and their hopes for the future. But, while Palestinians do their best to protect their children from the dangers and indignities of the Israeli occupation, they have been unable to prevent the steady erosion of childhood. In this report, I will focus on the vulnerability of Palestinian children in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but I also want to move beyond the notion of children simply as victims and to discuss some of the ways in which they have influenced the national liberation debate and changed the direction of the struggle.



In order to appreciate fully the victimization and active involvement of Palestinian children under occupation, the report will be divided into several parts. Firstly, it will briefly review the experiences of children since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, in terms of educational and other trends affecting children and young people. Secondly, it will consider the very important role played by children during the first *intifada*. The third section will explore what has happened to children as a result of the second *intifada*, which began last September. Fourthly, it will comment on the psychological impact on children of the current violence. A final section will seek to place Palestinian children's experiences in perspective by focusing on some of the broader issues of international children's

rights. In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a "child" is defined as anyone less than 18 years of age. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, almost half the population is aged less than 15.²

¹ Nizar Qabbani, "Marginal Notes in the Book of the Setback" (*Hawamish ala Daftar al-Naksa*), first published in *al-Adab* magazine, August 1967.

² The Demographic Survey of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, carried out in 1995, revealed that 46.5 per cent of the population is aged 15 years and under (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, August 1997).

A history of suffering: Palestinian children in the aftermath of catastrophe

“One day, some soldiers came to arrest me. I remember one of them had a flowing beard. He looked at our son who had just been born and said ‘Is it a boy or a girl?’ My wife was so terrified that they would shoot him that she blurted, ‘He’s a girl, he’s a girl’.”³

The *nakba*, the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948, when the majority of Palestinians were uprooted from their land and forced to flee and take refuge outside the area which subsequently became the state of Israel, had a devastating effect on all Palestinians, including children. In order to address the humanitarian disaster, the United Nations set up camps, run by its Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for the refugees (in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza Strip). The children born in these camps in the early years “heard constant talk of going back, but they lived and grew up in the mud and cold, the stench and heat of the present, while the tents of the camps hardened into bare concrete rooms”.⁴

For Palestinians in the aftermath of the mass exodus of 1948, education took on fresh significance. It was felt, especially among refugee camp residents that, only through the acquisition of knowledge and skills, could the displaced Palestinian population hope to regain its homeland. Palestinians gradually obtained a reputation as the best educated community in the Arab world, which was a source of great pride since education is bound up with a sense of national identity and widely regarded as the key to the future.

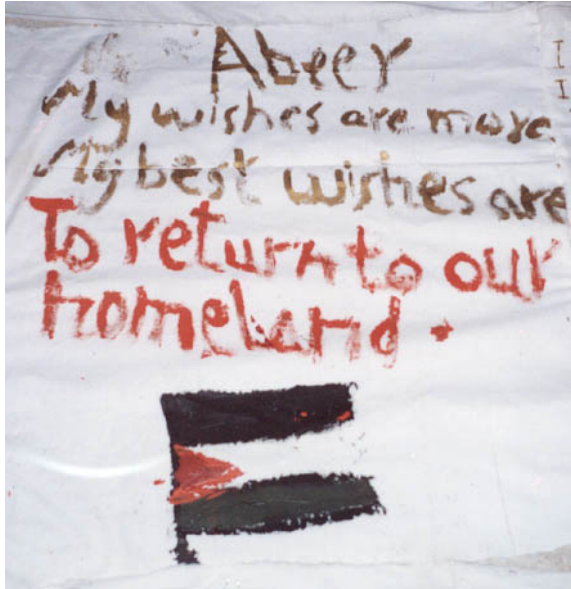
In 1967, the situation for Palestinians deteriorated still further when, as a result of the six-day war, Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. This development was of particular concern to children, who were now exposed to direct contact with the Israelis. Although Palestinians living in these areas are supposed to be protected by the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, which provides for the protection of civilians in times of war and living under military occupation, Israel does not recognize the provisions of the Convention, which has serious implications for children’s rights. Before 1967, the legal rights of children in the West Bank were governed by Jordanian Juvenile Law No 16, in accordance with international law, which placed the age of legal responsibility at 18 years. This was amended after Israel seized control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, by Israeli Military Orders 132, of September 1967, and 225, of March 1968, which lowered the age of legal responsibility to 16 years and stated that no child under 12 years of age may be arrested or tried.

After 1948, the Jordanian curriculum was used for the provision of education in the West Bank and the Egyptian curriculum in the Gaza Strip and these, with modifications, were kept after the occupation began. But the educational system was widely felt to be out of date and increasingly irrelevant. It failed to reflect Palestinian concerns or national aspirations, which many Palestinians believed was a deliberate strategy as the Israelis had no desire to encourage Palestinian nationalism. According to a report, “the educational policy

³ Abu Talal, from Khan Younis, during Israeli occupation of Gaza Strip, 1956-7, quoted in Paul Cossali & Clive Robson, *Stateless in Gaza*, London: Zed Books, 1986.

⁴ Kamal Boullata, *Palestine Today*, Washington, DC: Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence, 1990.

under the Israeli occupation severely limited the acquisition of knowledge regarding Palestinian history and culture, that the occupation authorities deleted from the curricula materials which refer to Palestine, love of one's country, Palestinian patriotism and the national identity of the Palestinian people".⁵ Palestinian initiatives to improve the educational system were systematically stifled. Palestinians argued that such repression was designed to force an increased dependency on Israel. It was, they say, a question of control.



Palestinians growing up under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip exhibit a high degree of political consciousness. All of them know the name of the village in Palestine from which their family originally came and most are well versed in the complexities of the conflict. Their lives are circumscribed by two constants: the first is the ever-present danger of Israeli assault against camps and homes, of curfews and closures, detention and beatings and the second is an

early grasp of the language of resistance. In school, "demonstrations and stone throwing are part of a tradition".⁶ With the occupation, schools became arenas of confrontation between young people and Israeli soldiers; harassment of school children, and even physical violence towards them, have been a common feature of the occupation. Although the Israeli authorities were keen to suppress all signs of Palestinian nationalism, the tactics they employed had the opposite effect. By sensitizing children from an early age, the Israelis ensured the development of a politically-aware population.

The role of children in the first *intifada*

"But I'm afraid that my dreams will hit up against the walls of the camp. Or that they'll get lost among its crooked and narrow alleys, or that they'll be polluted by the smell of garbage. I'm afraid when I dream that my dreams will hit up against my reality..."

In December 1987, what came to be known as the Palestinian *intifada* against Israeli occupation erupted in the Gaza Strip. It quickly spread, galvanizing all sectors of the population into forms of protest activities and resistance. There is no doubt that children were a key component of the *intifada*. Their participation represents a shift from the politics of their parents and grandparents' generation,

⁵ Economic Commission for Western Asia, "Social programmes and data in the ECWA region", Beirut, 1980, pp.8-9.

⁶ Daoud Kuttub, "A Profile of the Stonethrowers", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol XVII, No 3, Spring 1988, p.15.

which has been described as “resigned”, to an altogether more confrontational approach. Older Palestinians “admit that their approach to the occupation ha[d] not produced results. They recognize[d] that expecting a solution from the outside world or from the Arabs [was] futile”.⁷

Theories have been formulated to explain the participation of children in the *intifada*. It has been described, for example, in terms of “rites of passage” whereby Palestinian male youths were able to turn the beatings they received at the hands of Israeli soldiers into “the attainment and enactment of manhood and masculinity”.⁸ In other words, to be beaten was part of the process of “becoming a man” and this meant a very different sort of man to one’s father who had become, in the eyes of his children, a powerless and humiliated individual. Parents, on the whole, were “proud of their children and their accomplishments. Naturally they [were] worried about the possibility that they may be wounded or killed in the demonstrations, but they [knew] they [could not] stop them from going out”.⁹ Thus, as changes in attitude occurred within the Palestinian community, resignation was replaced by a powerful determination among the majority of people to liberate themselves and to establish a state of their own. Many of the changes that took place can be attributed to the enthusiastic and courageous example set by children.



They have been described as the “children of the stones” but also as “the lost generation”, and it is important to consider children’s involvement in terms of agency, in the sense that many young people made a deliberate decision to become involved in what were frequently violent and dangerous encounters

⁷ “A Profile of the Stonethrowers”, p.18.

⁸ Julie Peteet, “Male Gender and Rituals of Resistance in the Palestinian Intifada: A Cultural Politics of Violence”, in Mai Ghousseub & Emma Sinclair-Webb, editors, *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East*, London: Saqi Books, 2000, pp.103-126.

⁹ “A Profile of the Stonethrowers”, p.18.

between Israeli troops and unarmed Palestinian civilians; and victimization, since children suffered disproportionately: their education was disrupted and often ceased altogether; relatively high numbers of children were killed, injured and in many cases permanently disabled; and any idea of “childhood” as a time of carefree development was brutally extinguished.

Education, for example, became a battleground during the *intifada*. The Israeli authorities adopted a policy of widespread disruptions to the educational system in the hope of stamping out the uprising. Israeli troops taunted and provoked students on their way to school; they regularly stormed schools and threw tear gas into classrooms, with the result that buildings and equipment were damaged; and they physically assaulted staff and students both inside and outside schools. This contributed to strong feelings of insecurity, particularly among younger children.

Another ploy was to close down schools altogether. All 1,194 schools in the West Bank were closed by military order for nine months in 1988 and eight months in 1989. This affected approximately 310,000 students. Although no official reasons were given for the closures, the Israeli authorities defended them on the grounds that schools act as “hot beds of Palestinian nationalism” and “centres of violent protest”. Palestinians, however, interpreted the closures as a collective punishment aimed, on the one hand, at eroding their will to resist the occupation and, on the other, at reducing an entire generation to illiteracy.

In response, Palestinians sought to create alternative networks of education. To many it seemed that, at last, an opportunity had arisen to introduce a specifically Palestinian curriculum and this was viewed very positively by educators and students alike. Classes began to be held in mosques, gardens and private homes. In spring 1988, an underground school was started in Beit Sahour in the West Bank. “Popular education” was enthusiastically received by the local community. Its objectives were threefold. First, it aimed to preserve educational motivation among all school children. Second, it sought to prevent the spread of illiteracy among younger children. Third, it directly challenged the apparent intention to promote ignorance among the occupied population. Another motive, of course, was to lay the infrastructural foundations for a future Palestinian state.

The Israeli authorities, on learning about the mushrooming of popular education, promptly declared it illegal. Teachers and students became liable for arrest and punishment. In March 1989, UNRWA’s attempt to hand out home-study packs to its primary school pupils was similarly forbidden. This leads one to the inescapable conclusion that it was education itself which was being punished.

Although the long and short-term impacts on Palestinian education were extremely grave, it is important to bear in mind too the more positive aspects of the experience. Despite the denial of formal education, children had the opportunity to participate in a social and far-reaching struggle, which had as its objective the liberation of the Palestinian homeland. They acquired a new sense of identity, as heroes of the *intifada* and, as such, their patterns of actions were mapped out for them. They threw stones at Israeli soldiers, erected roadblocks, burned tyres and daubed nationalist and anti-occupation slogans on any available surface. They were actively involved, from the smallest to the largest, and the value of such involvement should not be underestimated. For children, the *intifada* provided an alternative framework in which they were able to acquire a

wide range of useful skills, such as self-esteem, a strong group identity and a sense of responsibility towards the broader community.

But it was also a time of great suffering and one should stress that, although large numbers of young people chose to take an active part in the anti-occupation demonstrations, others tried to avoid danger and to continue with as normal a life as possible. On the whole, however, the Israeli authorities failed to distinguish between those who participated and those who did not; the entire Palestinian population was defined as “terrorist”, including toddlers and kindergarten children, and subjected to collective punishment. As a result, children suffered in an unprecedented fashion. The world they knew fell apart, and was replaced by fear and uncertainty. Children were beaten, wounded, disabled, tortured, imprisoned and very often killed. Their lives would never be the same again. All age groups were victims of the *intifada*, even babies and small infants who died as a result of inhaling highly toxic tear gas fired into their homes.

Between December 1987 and the end of 1989, 937 Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were killed. Of these, 228 – or 24.3 per cent of the total – were children aged 16 years or younger. The average age of children killed was 11 years. Out of the total, 155 met their deaths as a result of live ammunition and 42 died after inhaling tear gas. The remainder were run over, electrocuted, struck by plastic bullets, tortured or beaten to death. In the five years from the beginning of the *intifada* in December 1987 to the middle of 1993, a total of 232 Palestinian children were killed by the Israeli security forces, and between December 1992 and June 1993 alone, 38 children were killed by Israeli gunfire, the youngest a four-year old girl.

In the view of the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem, the main reason for the killing of children in such large numbers was “a deliberate policy of opening fire in situations in which soldiers are not in mortal danger”.¹⁰

There were various other forms of harm to which children were subjected. A common practice of the Israeli military was to raid houses during the night. This involved the forceful entry of large numbers of troops, who then proceeded to destroy furniture and possessions and to attack family members. It must be a particularly horrifying experience for any young child to witness his or her father being beaten and humiliated, and even being removed altogether from the family home. Neither was the child immune from physical abuse. Children, even the smallest, were routinely harassed on the streets. They were threatened, accused of stone throwing and beaten. One much-publicized Israeli punishment involved the deliberate breaking of bones; to break a child’s hand, it was reasoned, would stop him from throwing stones for a month or two.

Family life, too, was altered. Values within the family were challenged and forced to adapt as authority slipped out of the hands of adult males. Since children were the ones most active in the *intifada*, they assumed an unfamiliar sense of power and responsibility. Many children tended to respond more positively to instructions contained in the leaflets issued by the Unified National

¹⁰ Statistics from B’Tselem, “The killing of Palestinian children and the open-fire regulations”, Information Sheet, June 1993, pp.16-19.

Command of the Uprising than they did to their parents. While this may be unsurprising, its implications for the future were of concern in terms of social stability.

A survey was carried out in 1998 of several hundred young Palestinian adults in the Gaza Strip who had spent at least half of their adolescence during the *intifada*. Most of the respondents (86 per cent of males and 87 per cent of females) agreed that the *intifada* was *worth the effort* and the majority (74 per cent, 80 per cent) believed it had been *successful*. Only a small minority (seven per cent, ten per cent) reported that they felt like *giving up the struggle*, while most (66 per cent, 49 per cent) said they could *carry on the struggle forever*. Just over half the young people (55 per cent, 58 per cent) admitted they had felt *worried about the future* during the struggle. Approximately three-quarters revealed that they *discovered who they were as persons* during the *intifada*. Both male and female youth consistently reported that they were *positively affected by their involvement*. They said they *became more mature* (78 per cent, 72 per cent), *more concerned about social issues* (75 per cent, 73 per cent), *more useful as a person* (85 per cent, 72 per cent), and *more respected by their community* (81 per cent, 64 per cent). The researchers concluded that “given the absence of tangible progress politically or economically since the end of the Intifada – especially in the Gaza Strip – there has been a decline in feelings about the value of their struggle and their self-perceptions of the efficacy of their involvement. Nevertheless, still majorities of youth feel positively about their role in the struggle and about themselves personally”.¹¹



Still struggling : children and the second intifada

“We are dealing with a situation in which kids are cynically being used by being put on the front lines where they may be killed maimed or injured... If a young boy falls, it gives [them] a lot of propaganda points”.¹²

At the end of September 2000, the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip began a second popular uprising in protest against the failure to end the Israeli military occupation. The current *intifada*, however, is very different to its predecessor. This time, the Israeli response has been considerably more deadly.

¹¹ Brian K Barber, “What Has Become of the ‘Children of the Stone’?”, *Palestine-Israel Journal*, Volume VI, No 4, 1999/2000, pp.7-15. The information for his article comes from a 1998 survey of 702 young adults (aged 20-27 years) in the Gaza Strip.

¹² An Israeli army captain, quoted in the *St Petersburg Times*, October 2000.

But, as before, Palestinian children have been both caught up in the cycle of violence and disproportionately victimized by it.

Harm against children

A few days into the *intifada*, on 30 September 2000, Israeli soldiers killed a 12-year old Palestinian boy called Muhammad Al-Durra in Gaza. His death, cowering behind his father, was caught on film and the image of the terrified child quickly became a symbol of the uprising. According to his father, they had visited a used car market in Gaza City. On their way back home, they encountered a demonstration, so crossed the road to avoid trouble. They heard machine gun fire and realized it was coming in their direction. “I could see the gunfire was coming from the Israeli military point”, said Jamal Al-Durra, “but still couldn’t believe they were firing at an unarmed man and a young boy”. Although Jamal pleaded for them to stop, the shooting continued and Muhammad died lying across his father; even then, the gunfire did not cease, and the first ambulance man who tried to reach the injured Jamal, was shot dead.¹³ Various reports refer to the massive psychological impact of this image on Palestinian children, who witnessed with horror the inability of the father to protect his child.

In July of this year, however, the Israeli defence establishment decided not to pay any compensation to the boy’s family. Israel argues that, according to Article 5 of the Damages Law, “the state is not responsible for damages as a result of actions taken by the IDF during war operations”.¹⁴

Muhammad’s tragic death was the first of what was to become a regular occurrence: Palestinian children “accidentally” killed by Israelis, and here it is possible to see clear parallels with the first *intifada*. Between 28 September 2000 and 4 September 2001, 166 Palestinian children below the age of 18 were killed by Israeli security forces and settlers. A further approximately 6,000 children suffered injuries, including permanent disability.¹⁵



Although the Israelis claim that these deaths and injuries were not deliberate or that the victims “provoked” them, the reports of independent observers suggest otherwise.

In July, for example, a group of Western diplomats travelling from Jerusalem to Ramallah claim that they witnessed Israeli soldiers firing live ammunition at a group of children throwing stones. The diplomats report that the shots were fired even though the children were too far away to pose a risk to the soldiers. One of the diplomats says he saw a soldier in the observation tower clap and raise his hands in victory after his colleague fired at the children.¹⁶

On 31 July 2001, two children, aged five

¹³ “Interview with Jamal Al Durra, the father of Mohammed”, *The Mirror*, 11 January 2001.

¹⁴ Gideon Alon, “Palestinian victims of the Intifada will not get compensation”, *Ha’aretz*, 24 July 2001.

¹⁵ Miftah, Special Report : Intifada Update (No 22), “Palestinian Human and Material Losses Inflicted by Israel during the Intifada (Uprising) : September 28, 2000 until September 4, 2001”.

¹⁶ Amira Hass, “Envoys say they saw IDF fire at children”, 26 July 2001.

and eight, were killed when Israeli forces fired missiles at an apartment building in Nablus, with the aim of assassinating the director of the Palestinian Center for Information, which was housed in the building. The children had gone to Nablus with their parents in order to buy items for school. They were standing outside the apartment building waiting for their mother who was visiting a doctor. Even though children were not the intended victims, the deaths of the two children in Nablus brought to seven the number of children killed since the beginning of the year as a result of Israel's policy of assassination.¹⁷

There are reports, too, that the high rates of crippling injuries caused to unarmed Palestinian civilians, of whom a high proportion are young boys, "are in large part due to the fragmenting bullets fired by M16s. The American-made Colt weapons, introduced during the Vietnam War as lightweight field rifles capable of inflicting maximum damage on the enemy, are being used increasingly by the Israel Defense Forces against civilian demonstrators. The M16 ammunition often breaks into tiny pieces after penetration, ripping up muscle and nerve and causing multiple internal injuries".¹⁸

The Institute of Community and Public Health at Birzeit University estimates that at least 1,000 people are likely to be permanently affected after being hit by Israeli live fire, shrapnel or rubber-tipped bullets. According to Mohammed Abu Tair, an orthopaedics specialist at Makassad Hospital in Jerusalem, most of the injured are "relatively young, the potential labour force – the power of the society itself".¹⁹

Education

There is no doubt that children "are the heart of the home front. Any injury to them will severely affect national morale. Therefore, when schools remain open during the war, the public interprets this as a message that things are under control. On the other hand nothing makes the population feel the danger threatening the home front more acutely than the closure of schools".²⁰



¹⁷ Defence for Children International/Palestine Section, "A Palestinian Child is Killed Every Five Days – DCI/PS Urges Immediate International Action", Press Release, 2 August 2001.

¹⁸ Lamis Andoni & Sandy Tolan, "Israel's favoured ammo is crippling a generation of young Palestinians: Shoot to maim", *The Village Voice*, 21 February 2001.

¹⁹ Suzanne Goldenberg, "Mutilated children of a crippled Palestine", *The Guardian*, 1 May 2001.

During the current *intifada*, the Israelis have reverted to their familiar policy of targeting Palestinian education as a method of collective punishment. Teachers and schoolchildren have been subjected to violence and schools have been attacked. Israeli checkpoints “have been placed to impede travel on roads leading to schools, and Palestinian pupils and teachers have been shot at, killed, wounded or arrested on their way to school”.²¹ In addition, since the beginning of the *intifada*, 174 schools have been shut down for varying periods due to Israeli siege, thus preventing as many as 90,000 students from attending school.²²

According to international children’s rights agency Save the Children: “Education is the right of all children and is fundamental to development. It is vital for Palestine, which has a young population, but recent events have clearly demonstrated how vulnerable any achievements in building education provision are. Schools, teachers and students are struggling to keep the system going in the face of closure, violence and impoverishment”.²³ They must also cope with the adverse psychological effects of a permanently stressful environment.

In the words of Rana, a 14-year old girl who lives near Beit Jala in the West Bank: “The firing makes you tense and that affects your studying. On the other hand, the fighting makes you even more motivated to learn so that you can do something for your people”. When asked what she would like to do once the war is over, she responds, “I love English and would like to write but being a doctor is of more use to my people. But all this is about the future. And there is no future without freedom”.²⁴

Detention and torture

In 1999, Israeli Military Order 132, which allows for the arrest, detention and imprisonment of children aged between 12 and 14 years and which had been suspended after the Oslo Accords, was re-implemented. This permitted the initiation of “mass arrests” of Palestinian children. The fact that children are being held as “political prisoners” should be a matter of urgent international concern.

Since the beginning of the current *intifada*, there have been reports of the arrest and torture of Palestinian minors by the Israeli military authorities. For example, B’Tselem published a report containing the testimonies of ten boys, aged between 14 and 17 years, who were arrested between October 2000 and January 2001, on suspicion of throwing stones. In most cases, they were arrested in their homes in the middle of the night, taken to a police station and tortured by police interrogators until the following morning. The objective of the police was to obtain information about the activities of other children and the torture methods used include “forcing the minors to stand in painful positions for prolonged periods; beating the minors severely for many hours, at times with the use of

²⁰ B Noy, “The Open Line for Students in the Gulf War in Israel”, *School Psychology International*, Vol 13, pp.207-227.

²¹ LAW (The Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights & the Environment), “Israel Violating Palestinian Right to Education”, Report updated March 2001.

²² Miftah, Intifada Update (No 22)

²³ Eddie Thomas, Middle East Advocacy Advisor, Save the Children, in a report “Palestine: The education of children at risk”, presented to the 57th Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, March 2001.

²⁴ Graham Usher, “First freedom, then the future”, *Al Ahram Online*, 19 April 2001.

various objects; splashing cold water on the detainees in the facility's courtyard in wintry conditions; pushing the minor's head into the toilet bowl and flushing the toilet; making death threats; cursing and degrading the minors".

According to one of the detainees, 15-year old Sultan: "The soldiers took me to a room and sat me down on a chair. One of them took off the handcuffs and tied my hands and feet to the chair's legs... They asked me if I threw stones at army vehicles on the main road. At first, I denied that I did. But two or three of them started to beat me in the face and head. The interrogation lasted for around five hours... At the end, they took me to the bathroom near the interrogation room. One of the interrogators grabbed me by the hair and put my head in the toilet. I was frightened. When they took me back to the interrogation room, I decided to confess. I told them that I threw five stones at a settler's vehicle. They wrote up a detailed testimony and forced me to sign it".²⁵

Article 37 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that "the arrest and imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law and shall be used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time", and further that "no child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment". Yet the Israeli military authorities are routinely disregarding these provisions in their treatment of Palestinian children. Telmond Prison near Netanya in Israel contains Palestinian male children from the West Bank and Gaza Strip who are under the age of 16. At the end of July, approximately 70 child political prisoners were being held at Telmond. A lawyer, who tried to visit the children, was refused permission, effectively sealing off the facility from the outside world "at a time when there is overwhelming evidence of severe human rights violations occurring inside the prison".²⁶

Israeli officials are reluctant to comment on under-age prisoners. A spokesman for Prime Minister Sharon said questions should be put to the police and the military. According to a military spokesman, "anyone who commits an act of violence against Israel will be arrested and sentences are at the court's discretion".²⁷ Palestinian children "arrested, detained and/or imprisoned by the Israeli occupation authorities routinely face violations of their rights, as provided in the CRC, the UN Convention against Torture, the Fourth Geneva Convention and other international instruments". According to Defence for Children International, more than 250 Palestinian children were detained between the end of September 2000 and the middle of January 2001.²⁸

Israeli justifications

In defence of its aggression against Palestinian children, Israel has offered a number of justifications and some of these have entered the realms of popular mythology. One is that Palestinian parents deliberately send out their children to

²⁵ "Palestinian children tortured", Robert Younes, editor, *The Palestine Digest*, Vol 1, No 49, 21 July 2001.

²⁶ DCI/PS. "Palestinian Lawyers Banned from Visiting Political Prisoners – DCI/PS Gravely Concerned with Severe Abuse of Child Detainees at Telmond Prison", Press Release, 25 July 2001.

²⁷ Jamie Tarabay, "Palestinian Teens Allege Abuse", *Miftah*, July 2001.

²⁸ DCI/PS, "More than 250 Palestinian children detained since 28 September 2000", Press Release, 15 January 2001.

confront the Israeli army and by “placing them in the front line” ensure that they will be killed or injured. Palestinians, according to this myth, welcome the martyrdom of their children. However, if one reads accounts of mothers who have lost their children in the latest round of violence, a very different picture emerges.



In’am Oda, for example, is the mother of Faris, whose picture, facing an Israeli tank with a stone in his hand, is another famous image of the *intifada*. Faris, aged 13, was killed in Gaza last November. Says his mother, “I haven’t been able to sleep or think since his death because the question haunts me – is it my fault or did God just decide to take him away from me?” She continues: “Nobody would believe what goes on here. One time I went looking for my boy, and I got to the area where a real battle seemed to be going on. Bullets were falling on these kids like rain. I just sat on the floor screaming hysterically, grabbing any child who passed by, thinking he might be my son”. Her sister, Iktimal, who has also lost one of her children, comments: “My son is gone, but who can guarantee that I wouldn’t lose any more of my children? Our house is just down the road from the clashes... Where can I hide them to keep them safe?”²⁹

The Israelis also claim that they have been forced to resort to heavy handed tactics, such as the use of live ammunition, by the high level of Palestinian violence; that they have been compelled to open fire on crowds of demonstrators in “self-defence”. But Khalil, an 11-year old boy who was shot dead near Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip in July, was not demonstrating, only playing football with his friends. Just before sunset, the children went to sit on the sand dune above the football pitch. In the words of another of the boys, “Khalil was looking out towards Egypt. He put his hand to his head, looked at the blood and then fell over”. An adult, who witnessed the incident, confirmed the boys’ account. “He

²⁹ “Too many mothers have lost their children”, *Hear Palestine*, 29 November 2000.

said the children did regularly throw stones at tanks but not at the time of the shooting. There was no demonstration. They had been playing football”.³⁰

Even when children are actively involved in demonstrations, their actions are unlikely to threaten the lives of Israeli personnel. For example, in late February, 13-year old Muhammad went with a group of children to the area in Gaza where residents of the Israeli settlement of Netzarim drive past with their escort of military jeeps. The children started to throw stones at the convoy. In response, one of the soldiers fired two live bullets at the children, hitting Muhammad in the head. He died of his injury several days later.³¹

Psychological effects of the violence on children

*“The do not play like normal children elsewhere in the world. Their games reflect their daily life: children with stones facing heavily armed Israeli soldiers”.*³²

The reality of life for small children is reflected in their games and their drawings. Before the first *intifada*, four and five-year olds used to draw trees, houses and members of their families. After, however, their drawings grew darker and started to depict soldiers, barbed wire, flags and burning tyres. They started to play games such as “children and soldiers” or “Border Police and Arabs”, with appropriate gestures and language. Such games, it has been suggested, are a way of coming to terms with the intense vulnerability of their lives. Now, when they play “Israeli soldiers and Palestinians”, many children prefer to take the Israeli part as it is the more powerful side.

During the first *intifada*, the level of anxiety caused by the constant threat of violent intrusion into previously safe spaces, whether at home or at school, was high. It tended to promote a general state of insecurity throughout the population, but particularly among children. This was made even worse by the fact that parents could no longer be relied upon to provide protection.



³⁰ Ewen MacAskill, *The Guardian*, 13 July 2001.

³¹ Amira Hass, “What, Palestinians suffer from traumas and anxieties?”, *Ha’aretz*, 25 March 2001.

As before, children have been disproportionately victimized by the current violence, but have also sought to involve themselves as instigators. The “children have learned the language and the meaning of the occupation. Even if every child has not been humiliated by the Israeli soldiers or told that his or her life is worthless, the environment sends this message loud and clear”.³³ In response, children express their anger and their defiance by throwing stones at the occupiers. As 13-year old Marwan from Gaza asserts: “We have to fight them and free our country from these pigs. If I could only get a gun, I would shoot them all”.³⁴

The uprising has caused many Palestinian children to suffer from nightmares. Clinical psychologist Dr Shafiq Masalha has conducted a study into dreams and he concluded that “78 percent of Palestinian children have political dreams and 15 percent dream of dying as martyrs”.³⁵ An 11-year old girl, for example, dreamed that she found an unexploded Israeli missile and fired it at a Jewish settlement. She said: “Many Israelis died in the attack. Because of the missile I found, the police learned how to make similar missiles and they fired every night at another settlement until the number of settlers decreased”.³⁶

Issa is seven years old and lives in the Bureij refugee camp in Gaza. According to his mother, Issa complains of headaches, wets his bed at night and is aggressive with his sisters. He has difficulty sleeping and often wakes up in the night shaking with terror. His mother attributes his state of mind to a night nine months earlier when soldiers burst into their home and beat his father and elder brother. Comments Issa, “I am always afraid of the soldiers. They beat my friends at school and my teachers many times. I run away when I see them coming. I want to beat them, but they are very strong and they have guns. They kill”.³⁷

Dr Eyad El-Sarraj, who heads the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, has spoken of a generation of children growing up in the Gaza Strip “scarred by severe trauma and addicted to violence”.³⁸ In Gaza, where half the population is below the age of 14, you see “children with no hope for the future, not skilled because their schooling has been so disrupted, quite desperate. Their parents transmit a continuous message of helplessness, fear, anxiety, deep despair in their eyes. The children feel totally unprotected and see that their parents are powerless”.³⁹

The GCMHP conducted a survey into the psychological effects of Israeli bombardment on civilians in the Gaza Strip. One of the groups studied contained 121 children between three and 16 years of age. The study revealed that 96.6 per cent of the children had witnessed shootings, 22.9 per cent saw family members injured or killed, and 35.1 per cent saw neighbours killed or injured. As a result, 54.6 per cent of the children started to develop acute symptoms of post-traumatic

³² Nehaya Al-Helo, “The trauma of growing up in Palestine”, *AF*, 13 August 1990, p.7.

³³ Eyad El Sarraj, “Peace and the Children of the Stone”, October 2000, p.2.

³⁴ “Peace and the Children of the Stone”, p.4.

³⁵ “Palestinian children’s dreams haunted by bloodshed”, Reuters, 25 July 2001, published by www.arabia.com.

³⁶ “Palestinian children’s dreams haunted by bloodshed”.

³⁷ “Peace and the Children of the Stone”, p.5.

³⁸ Victoria Brittain, “Trouble in store for war-scarred sons of Gaza”, *The Guardian*, 13 April 2001.

³⁹ “Trouble in store for war-scarred sons of Gaza”.

stress disorder and a further 34.5 per cent started to develop medium symptoms. In addition, it was discovered that 13.3 per cent of children are suffering from an increase in mental and behavioural problems, such as sleep disorders, hyperactivity, speech disorders, lack of concentration and aggressive behaviour.⁴⁰

A child from a refugee family in Gaza wrote: “I dreamt that a warplane was bombing all the houses in the camp. I heard that the Jews intended to bomb the children. I ran away. The plane chased me. It bombed my house. All the children were martyred”.⁴¹ According to Dr Massalha, the children “feel that their parents are not competent to protect them. A paternalistic society has lost its anchor. They turn to the Palestinian police instead, but in most cases the police don’t rescue them either. A generation of Palestinian children is growing up with no one to trust”.⁴² The Israeli bombardments of Gaza, says Dr El-Sarraj, “are completely terrifying... I’ve thought Gaza would be flattened as I listened to it – just try to image the impact on children”.⁴³

Children’s rights

“In all actions concerning children...the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” (Article 3, Convention on the Rights of the Child).

The rights of children all over the world are systematically abused on a daily basis. Their situation becomes even more precarious during episodes of armed conflict. Any discussion of children’s rights must take as its starting point the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This was signed and ratified by Israel and came into force there in November 1991. According to Article Two of the Convention: “States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind”. Yet, far from honouring its obligations under the Convention, Israel has “consistently and systematically engaged in gross violation of Palestinian children’s rights”.⁴⁴

Article 44 requires states that are party to the Convention to submit a report describing measures they have adopted to comply with the Convention within two years after entry into force of the Convention. In the case of Israel, the report was due by November 1993, but for seven years Israel failed to submit its report. When the report was finally submitted, at the end of 2000, it “made absolutely no mention of Palestinian children in the occupied territories, though the Convention makes ...clear that the provisions of the CRC are applicable to ALL children who reside in the areas under the control of the State Party – be it legal or illegal control”.⁴⁵

In December 1998, the UN General Assembly passed a Resolution on the Rights of the Child. It referred in part to children affected by armed conflict. The Resolution expressed “grave concern at the numerous damaging effects of armed conflicts on children, and emphasize[d] the need for the world community to

⁴⁰ GCMHP Study on the Psychosocial Effects of Al-Aqsa Intifada, July 2001.

⁴¹ Eric Silver, “The children who dream of dying for their cause”, *The Independent*, 11 July 2001.

⁴² “The children who dream of dying for their cause”.

⁴³ “Trouble in store for war-scarred sons of Gaza”.

⁴⁴ Defence for Children International/Palestine Section, “The Palestinian Uprising” (press release).

⁴⁵ DCI/PS, “The Palestinian Uprising”.

focus increased attention on this serious problem with a view to bringing it to an end”.⁴⁶

In an oral statement to the UN Commission on Human Rights in March 2001, the International Save the Children Alliance expressed its concern about the impact of regional instability on children, both Palestinian and Israeli. From the beginning of the *intifada*, in the words of the statement, “a sustained closure including an economic embargo has violated children’s rights to life, survival, development and education”.⁴⁷

Conclusions

As the first anniversary of the *intifada* approaches, we should be concerned about the future for Palestinian children in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The question of what happens to children during a popular uprising against a military occupation was addressed by a Swedish Save the Children report published in 1990. The report found that “large and even disproportionate numbers of children were being killed and injured [in the occupied Palestinian territories], all children were being subjected to a range of punishing collective measures, and families were found to be experiencing grave difficulties in fulfilling primary functions of child protection and care”.⁴⁸

When it comes to a discussion of children caught up in a situation of conflict, several areas of importance should be noted. The first, as already discussed, is the long-term psychological impact on children and young people as well as implications for the continued well-being of the community. Palestinian children frequently ask why they cannot live as other children do. They see the differences in living conditions between the Jewish children in settlements and their own dirty camps. They “observe Israeli settlers zooming by in their fast, well-protected cars that project an aura of power and security, in contrast to their own feelings of vulnerability”.⁴⁹

A second area of importance is the physical and intellectual health of the next generation, in terms of permanent disability and also educational provision. As a result of the current *intifada*, many thousands of children have sustained injuries which will not heal. In addition, in the view of Dr Eyad El-Sarraj, Palestinian society is now unprepared, either culturally or educationally, for peace. “If peace comes,” he says, “and the common enemy is removed, I fear the creation of a new enemy, chaos and violence, drug addiction – everything we have seen only in American movies”.⁵⁰

Thirdly, although the Palestinian population has borne by far the brunt of the deaths and injuries in the current round of violence, the Israelis have also suffered and it is relevant to examine the effects of the conflict on Israeli children, particularly in terms of how the experiences of children in both communities is bound to affect relations between them in the future. Children in Israel are

⁴⁶ General Assembly Resolution on the Rights of the Child 53/128, adopted on 9 December 1998.

⁴⁷ Oral Statement by the International Save the Children Alliance on violations of the rights of Palestinian children, UN Commission on Human Rights, 57th Session, 19 March 2001.

⁴⁸ Anne Elizabeth Nixon, “The Status of Palestinian Children during the Uprising in the Occupied Territories”, *Radda Barnen* (Swedish Save the Children), January 1990.

⁴⁹ “Peace and the Children of the Stone”, p.3.

⁵⁰ “Trouble in store for war-scarred sons of Gaza”.

learning to perceive their Palestinian counterparts as treacherous and untrustworthy, while Palestinian children see young Israelis as both undeservedly privileged and inexplicably bellicose. It is not a good basis for future neighbourly relations.

Fourthly, in the face of evident parental powerlessness and daily Israeli brutality, some Palestinian children have tried to fight back. Given their lack of resources, any such efforts must be purely symbolic. The stones that they throw are their sole means of asserting their resistance to the occupation. Their dreams reveal aspirations of heroism – or at least a modicum of power over their own lives, the desperate desire to liberate their people and regain their homeland. But their day-to-day reality fails to live up to the world of fantasy. Doomed to disappointment, some are seeking alternative models.



Young people in their teens, as Eyad El-Sarraj says, “are normally exploring and defining their identity. In their search for a model to adopt, Palestinian youth reject the helpless father who could not defend himself when Israeli soldiers beat him. They reject the Arab identity, which represents defeat and humiliation... The ideal self emerges through the ideals of Islam. Islam becomes the last refuge and enables a process of

developing a new identity”.⁵¹ It should not surprise us that many young people turn to the certainties offered by religion and that some are enticed by the appeal of martyrdom.

Finally, one should bear in mind the international dimension of the conflict. In the case of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, efforts have been made by the Israeli authorities to delegitimize Palestinian aspirations. These have included tactics such as branding the entire community “terrorist”, even the children. Thus, children’s internationally-recognized rights are disregarded. Instead of being treated as innocent civilians caught up in violent conflict, Palestinian children are accused of being perpetrators, deliberately trained to attack and harm Israelis and therefore a legitimate target for retribution. It is very necessary to redress the balance and return to Palestinian children the childhood that has been stolen from them.

“Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society’s margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies” (UN Secretary-General, Message for International Youth Day, 12 August 2001).

⁵¹ Eyad El-Sarraj, “The Making of a Suicide Bomber”, *Gaza Community Mental Health Programme*, October 1997, p.4.

Bibliography

- Alon, Gideon “Palestinian victims of the Intifada will not get compensation”, *Ha’aretz*, 24 July 2001.
- Andoni, Lamis, and Sandy Tolan, “Israel’s favoured ammo is crippling a generation of young Palestinians: Shoot to maim”, *The Village Voice*, 21 February 2001.
- Antonelli, Alessandra, “Broken childhood”, *Palestine Report*, 9 May 2001.
- Barber, Brian K, “What Has Become of the ‘Children of the Stone’?” *Palestine-Israel Journal*, Volume VI, No 4, 1999/2000.
- Boullata, Kamal, *Palestine Today*, Washington, DC: Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence, 1990.
- Brittain, Victoria, “Trouble in store for war-scarred sons of Gaza”, *The Guardian*, 13 April 2001.
- B’Tselem (the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), “The killing of Palestinian children and the open-fire regulations”, Information Sheet, June 1993.
- Chatty, Dawn, and Gillian Hundt, editors, *Children & Adolescents in Palestinian Households: Living with the Effects of Prolonged Conflict and Forced Migration*, Lessons Learned Report, Oxford: Refugee Studies Center, May 2001.
- Cossali, Paul and Clive Robson, *Stateless in Gaza*, London: Zed Books, 1986.
- Defence for Children International/Palestine Section (DCI/PS), *Annual Report 2000*.
- Defence for Children International/Palestine Section (DCI/PS), “More than 250 Palestinian children detained since 28 September 2000”, Press Release, 15 January 2001.
- Defence for Children International/Palestine Section, “Palestinian Lawyers Banned from Visiting Political Prisoners – DCI/PS Gravely Concerned with Severe Abuse of Child Detainees at Telmond Prison”, Press Release, 25 July 2001.
- Defence for Children International/Palestine Section, “A Palestinian Child is Killed Every Five Days – DCI/PS Urges Immediate International Action”, Press Release, 2 August 2001.
- Economic Commission for Western Asia, “Social programmes and data in the ECWA region”, Beirut, 1980.
- Ghoussoub, Mai & Emma Sinclair-Webb, editors, *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East*, London: Saqi Books, 2000.
- Giacaman, Rita, *Life and Health in Three Palestinian Villages*, London: Ithaca Press, 1988.

Goldenberg, Suzanne, "Mutilated children of a crippled Palestine", *The Guardian*, 1 May 2001.

Graff, James A, assisted by Mohamed Abdoell, *Palestinian Children & Israeli State Violence*, Toronto, Ontario: Near East Cultural and Educational Foundation of Canada (NECEF), 1991.

Graham-Brown, Sarah, *Education, Repression & Liberation: Palestinians*, London: World University Service (UK), 1984.

Hamilton, Carolyn, and Tabatha Abu El-Haj, "Armed Conflict: the Protection of Children Under International Law", Children & Armed Conflict Unit, University of Essex, 2000.

Hass, Amira, "What, Palestinians suffer from traumas and anxieties?" *Ha'aretz*, 25 March 2001.

Hass, Amira, "Envoys say they saw IDF fire at children", 26 July 2001.

Hear Palestine, "Too many mothers have lost their children", 29 November 2000.

Al-Helo, Nehaya, "The trauma of growing up in Palestine", *AF*, 13 August 1990.

Kuttab, Daoud, "A Profile of the Stonethrowers", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol XVII, No 3, Spring 1988.

LAW (The Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights & the Environment), "Israel Violating Palestinian Right to Education", Report updated March 2001.

MacAskill, Ewen, *The Guardian*, 13 July 2001.

Mandour, M, and I Hourani, "Effects of Uprising on Psycho-Social Development of Palestinian Children in Occupied Territories", Auckland: WFMF Congress, 21-25 August 1989.

Miftah, Special Report : Intifada Update (No 22), "Palestinian Human and Material Losses Inflicted by Israel during the Intifada (Uprising) : September 28, 2000 until September 4, 2001".

Mirror, The, 11 January 2001.

Nixon, Anne Elizabeth, "The Status of Palestinian Children during the Uprising in the Occupied Territories", *Radda Barnen* (Swedish Save the Children), January 1990.

Noy, B , "The Open Line for Students in the Gulf War in Israel", *School Psychology International*, Vol 13.

Qabbani, Nizar, "Marginal Notes in the Book of the Setback" (*Hawamish ala Daftar al-Naksa*), first published in *al-Adab* magazine, August 1967.

Peteet, Julie, "Male Gender and Rituals of Resistance in the Palestinian Intifada: A Cultural Politics of Violence", in Ghousseub, Mai & Emma Sinclair-Webb, editors, *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East*, London: Saqi Books, 2000.

Punamaki, Raija-Leena, "Childhood in the shadow of war: A psychological study on attitudes and emotional life of Israeli and Palestinian children", Faculte de Psychologie, Universite de Louvain, Belgium (undated).

Refugee Studies Programme, "The fearless children of the stone", *Refugee Participation Network* 7, February 1990.

Research Center, University Graduates Union, Hebron, "Reflections on the Lawful Situation on Palestinian Child under the Current Situation", May 1989.

Reuters, "Palestinian children's dreams haunted by bloodshed", 25 July 2001, published by www.arabia.com.

Rigby, Andrew, *Living the Intifada*, London: Zed Books, 1991.

Rouhana, Kate, "Children and the Intifadah", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol XVIII, No 4, Summer 1989.

Said, Edward W, *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969-1994*, London: Vintage, 1995.

El-Sarraj, Eyad, "The Making of a Suicide Bomber", *Gaza Community Mental Health Programme*, October 1997

El-Sarraj, Eyad, "Peace and the Children of the Stone", October 2000

Save the Children, Report "Palestine: The education of children at risk", presented to the 57th Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, March 2001.

Silver, Eric, "The children who dream of dying for their cause", *The Independent*, 11 July 2001.

Tarabay, Jamie, "Palestinian Teens Allege Abuse", *Miftah*, July 2001.

Usher, Graham, "First freedom, then the future", *Al Ahram Online*, 19 April 2001.

Younes, Robert editor, *The Palestine Digest*, Vol 1, No 49, 21 July 2001.