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Peace and the Children of the Stone

Frieden und die „Kinder der Steine“

Zusammenfassung Die Lebenssituation von Kindern im Gazastreifen ist geprägt durch die tägliche Gewalt, die Erfahrung der Intifada und die Sprache und die Bedeutung von Okkupation. Kinder glauben, dass das Leben nicht wert sei gelebt zu werden. Beispielsweise haben 92,5% der Kinder Tränengas eingeatmet, 42,5% waren Zeuge, wie ihre Väter geschlagen wurden. Die Kinder im Gazastreifen haben ihr Grundvertrauen und das Vertrauen in den Schutz durch die Familie/die Eltern verloren. Sie folgen Helden an Stelle ihrer Väter. Die Kinder sind ständig Traumatisierungen ausgeliefert, sie leiden darunter und die Symptome sind deutlich sichtbar.

Die Kinder im Gazastreifen wehren sich, indem sie Steine werfen. Gleichzeitig identifizieren sie sich hierdurch in Bezug auf das Problem. Kinder spalten ihr „Sklavensbewusstsein“ ab und praktizieren durch das Werfen der Steine ihr Recht auf ein freies Leben. Die Intifada von Al-Aqsa verspricht Heilung in naher Zukunft, aber lässt die Kinder mit ihrem Schmerz alleine. Die „Children of the stone“ sind aber nicht aus Stein gemacht, denn sie leiden täglich unter Angst und Schmerz. Das Werfen der Steine ist dann auch ein Versuch, die dämonischen Monster der nächtlichen Träume zu bekämpfen. Für das Vaterland zu sterben bzw. die Märtyrerrolle wurden zum höchsten Zeichen von Mut entwickelt.

Schlüsselwörter:

Sozialisierung von Kindern; Identifikation mit Intifada; Märtyrertum statt Definition des Selbst; Alpträume; Gewalterfahrung.

Introduction

The Intifada for Al-Aqsa that shook the area like an earthquake was not unexpected. There were many signs pointing to the eminent outbreak. These were clear to the ones that wanted to notice.

The first Intifada (1987–1994) was one of the main reasons that pushed Israel to the negotiation table, which bore the Oslo accords.

Events have proved that this agreement was terrible. It did not give back to the Palestinians their due rights. It also gave Israel the chance to continue to build new settlements and expand the existing ones. The latest outbreak came to prove, yet again, that the Israeli military establishment does not want peace that gives Palestinians a state and their other rights. It wants something else.

Children were at the forefront of the first Intifada. They are still in the front of the Intifada for Al-Aqsa. The picture of “Mohammad Al-Durra” captured the world and saddened people everywhere. It also highlighted the role of children in Palestinian society and in resisting the occupation.

At the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP), we decided to talk with the children themselves and to observe them in action in the street and at home. In addition, many families brought their children to the Programme for treatment of the effects of trauma. Finally, we conducted studies in the field, employing psychological surveys to understand more about their role, the extent of trauma and its effects.

The language of the occupation

The words “angry” and “defiant” accurately describe the Palestinian children. They are also tense and vigilant. For

many of them, throwing stones expresses that anger onto the Israeli soldiers who are the legitimate target.

These 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.

Sami, a twelve year old boy, was brought to the clinic by his mother after he attempted suicide by setting himself on fire. His legs were badly scarred, and he looked hostile, angry and depressed. Sami said, “I wanted to kill myself because my father did not bring me a new pair of trousers for the feast. He said that he did not have any money. Why should he have children then if he could not have a job?” His brother who was handicapped died a year ago. His mother believes that Sami has changed since then. “My brother Sameer died because he was cold. He was wet when we found him dead. It was raining all night and it was dripping on him from the leaking roof. He could not move himself because he was paralyzed.”

Sami strongly represents the situation of many Palestinian children, whose poor families cannot ensure care and security for them.

Children easily perceive the differences between living conditions in their dirty camps and in the newly-built Israeli settlements. These differences make them wonder why Jewish children living in the settlements deserve big, clean playgrounds and swimming pools while their refugee camps have open sewer systems and garbage piled high at

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every street corner. The buildings of the settlements are clean, the streets are clean and the grass is watered even when there is a water shortage in the camps. Palestinian children observe Israeli settlers zooming by in their fast, well-protected cars that project an aura of power and security, in contrast to their own feeling of vulnerability.

The language of the occupation sends the message that life is not worth living and that children born in the settlements are treasured while children born in the Palestinian camps, villages, or towns are despised. This environment drives home the message that the Palestinians are born to be the hewers of wood and drawers of water both for the settlers and for the Israeli economy. The children witness their fathers' and older brothers' humiliation as they stand in line at the "slave market" hoping to be offered one of the few jobs available – building yet another Israeli settlement.

Palestinian children were subjected to traumatic experiences that have made them special and dangerous at the same time. In 1991, the research team at GCMHP conducted a field study on a sample of 2,279 children. The results of the study showed the potential effect on the psyche of children.

Researchers found that 92.5% were subjected to tear-gas inhalation and 85% had their houses raided. One of the most alarming findings is related to "witnessing the beating of fathers." The study showed that 55% were humiliated and 42.5% witnessed their fathers being beaten.

Such experiences leave their mark on children's perceptions of themselves and the world around them. "If my father could not protect himself," a child wonders, "how on earth is he going to protect me?" The inevitable reaction is a mixture of fear, frustration, helplessness, anger, and – perhaps most tragically – rejection of the father. Children sometimes find themselves identifying with Israeli soldiers as symbols of power. At the very least, they are driven out of their homes to look for heroes to replace their fathers, who failed the test.

Another study showed that exposure to trauma leads to the children suffering from symptoms such as fear of the night (dark) since it is usually the scene for scary events. They also suffer from regression that is manifest through bed-

wetting, and preoccupation with violent events that is reflected in the deterioration in school performance. In addition, they suffer from the effects of violence and fatigue.

The making of a hero

The streets are the natural playgrounds for the children of Gaza. They vibrate with a life beat that makes them different from anywhere else: defiant, colorful, and dynamic. To be a child in Gaza is to be enticed by its streets, incited by the graffiti on every wall and irritated by the Israeli soldiers patrolling on foot or in their jeeps through your own territory. A gathering crowd of activists preparing for a confrontation with the soldiers fills the air with apprehension and excitement. Now it is not a game any more. The toys are real jeeps and the enemy are real soldiers. There he is, waiting just for you. This is where you can avenge your father's humiliation. This is what you can do to conquer your fear. This is where you will join the heroes, perhaps even becoming one yourself.

In the psychological sense, throwing stones is a form of recognizing and identifying the problem, a very crucial step in the making of the Intifada child. It becomes a way of rejecting the definition of self which has been imposed by the occupier. It is a process of externalizing the slave-consciousness that has been projected by the child, into his or her innermost being. Through this behavior children decide both to assert themselves and to exercise their right to a free and better life.

"I went home after school one day to find a big crowd in my uncle's house. I was told that my seventeen year old cousin was shot dead by the Israelis. Since then, I began to ask and to understand more about the Intifada," says Marwan, a thirteen year old boy from Gaza. "Now if they do not come, I go to look for them. We have to fight them and free our country from these pigs. If I could only get a gun, I would shoot them all."

Throwing stones became essentially a form of therapy not only for Palestinian children but also for the entire Palestinian nation. Years of helplessness and frustration gave way to active resistance and defiance. The collective sense of injured pride and humiliation was

transformed overnight into a state of self-respect. Internal division, recriminations, and communal violence were replaced by solidarity, unity and cohesion. All became one against a common enemy. Gloom and doom disappeared and a state of excitement and euphoria prevailed. Children became frontline heroes; however, they were forgotten as politicians lined to divide the spoils.

For a rare moment in the history of the conflict and with the participation of the little heroes, the Palestinians tasted victory when they effectively took control of their lives by rebelling against the occupation. Indeed, the Palestinian morale was such that it allowed them to enter the peace talks as equals. Today, the question remains on what the effects of the Intifada of Al-Aqsa are; and will the leadership use it to put the negotiations in the right track.

Trauma

Victories, however, do not come cheap. The Palestinians must still endure more pain. Ever since their eyes first saw the first glimmer of hope, they have witnessed their country in turmoil and spasm. Their collective memory is still alive with the dismemberment of Palestine, their mass exodus into bitter and cold exile, the Suez War, the October War, the invasion of Lebanon and life under military occupation that was challenged by the first Intifada. Now it is the Intifada of Al-Aqsa that promises salvation for the future but inflicts pain now. The Palestinians wish to see the pain joined hand in hand with the birth of freedom and dignified life.

But it is hard. For every act of rebellion or defence, the Israelis react with even more oppression and harshness. The children are particularly hard hit. From the shoot-to-kill policy and the breaking bones policy to the night raids and beatings, the children are forced to face the new challenge of a new time. They simply cannot afford the luxury of childhood and have to assume the worries of the adulthood.

As a child in a Gaza Camp, you must worry about being chased, arrested, beaten or shot. You worry about your older brother who was arrested a few weeks ago. You miss him and you worry when your mother says that the Red Cross has no news of him. You also worry about your father: could he get a

La paix, les enfants et les pierres

Résumé Le quotidien des enfants vivant dans la bande de Gaza est marqué par la violence et l'Intifada, ainsi que par le langage et les implications de l'occupation. Ces enfants pensent que la vie ne vaut pas la peine d'être vécue. A titre d'exemple : 92.5% ont déjà inhalé du gaz lacrymogène ; 42.5% étaient présents lorsque leurs pères ont été battus. Les gamins de Gaza ont perdu tout sentiment de sécurité et toute confiance en la capacité de leur famille ou de leurs parents de les protéger. Des héros leur servent de modèle à la place de leur père. Ils sont constamment exposés à des traumatismes ; ils en souffrent et manifestent des symptômes très clairs.

Les enfants de Gaza se défendent en jetant des pierres, mais simultanément ils s'identifient au problème. Ils dissocient leur « état d'esclave » et lancer des cailloux leur permet d'exercer leur droit à une vie libre. L'Intifada d'Al-Aqsa promet des jours meilleurs pour bientôt, mais elle laisse les gosses seuls avec leur douleur. Or, les « children of the stone » ne sont pas faits de pierre ; ils souffrent chaque jour, ils ont peur et ils ont mal. D'autre part, en jetant des pierres ils tentent aussi de bannir les monstres démoniaques qui, la nuit, peuplent leurs rêves. Mourir pour la patrie et assumer le rôle de martyr en sont donc venus à symboliser le vrai courage.

permit to work and will he bring food today? You feel deeply concerned for your friend who is in the hospital with gunshot wounds. They say it was a rubber bullet, but so much blood poured from his head. You could not speak to him in the hospital because he was unconscious.

The "children of the stone" are not made of stone. They suffer pain and fear. The extent of their exposure to traumatic events is horrific even at the statistical level. According to a GCMHP survey of 2,279 children, 42% were beaten, 4.5% have had their bones broken or severely injured, and 19% were detained for short periods of time.

Issa is seven year old boy from Bureij refugee camp. His mother said that he had completely changed in the last nine months. He complains of headaches, wets his bed at night and is aggressive with his sisters. She said that Issa has difficulty sleeping and frequently wakes up in the night shaking with terror. Issa was normal before the soldiers burst into the house one night and beat his father and elder brother. Issa says, "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."

When the battles are raging, the children fight with their stones for their right to exist; they fight the ghoulish monster of their dreams. When the battle is over, they gather to talk about their joy of forcing the enemy to retreat or their grief over their mates who fell. Those who fell remain in the painful corners of the hearts and minds of their fellow fighters.

But death could not be imagined, and had to be conquered. The dead became martyred, heroes who are blessed and in heaven. Children know that there, life is full of joy and no children are hurt. Martyrdom and dying for the sake of the homeland became the highest degree of bravery as if victory over death means sacrificing one's life.

At night, a child buries himself between his parents, terrified of the monsters who might suddenly jump over the wall hunting for their prey. In his dream, a monster pulls his gun to shoot; the child tries to flee. He is shaken awake by his mother. He has wet the bed again. The mother decides to take him to the clinic tomorrow. She made this decision many times, but her son is never home during the day. The mother is worried. Three of her children wet their beds. "What on earth is happening to them?" She asks nobody. She cannot ask her husband. He is too tired and moody after his release from the prison. He must have been through so much. She is worried about him. "Maybe he should see a doctor too?" she wonders.

After the first Intifada, we were wondering about the fate of the children of the stone, and how their lives will shape. That was at a time people were preparing for peace. Now, the children, whose future preoccupied us, are now fueling the Intifada for Al-Aqsa. They are sacrificing their lives in a tough challenge of death.

Many around the world asked, "what makes these children challenge danger?" It is regrettable that some of these people were not innocent in their question. They were implying that Palestinian mothers were pushing their children in face of danger with-

out caring about the consequences. Instead, they were supposed to ask themselves, "why the Israeli soldiers were killing children? And what are soldiers and settlers doing on Palestinian soil?"

These people have turned a blind eye to the real criminal and questioned the victim, who is easier to blame. This seemingly innocent question implies that Palestinian mothers have no maternity feelings to protect their children. This leads them to believe that Palestinians are beings that do not rise to the level of humanity. They are worse than dogs and cats that protect their offspring from danger.

This is the essence of racist thought that degrades humanity to make it easier to blame the victims, and then suppress any feelings of guilt of wrongdoing.

With all the pain, death, wounds, permanent handicaps of the children that have lost eyes or limbs, the trauma of confrontation and then attending funerals, and the shock of watching it all on television, children remain children, whether in Palestine or anywhere. We wish for them to enjoy peace and tranquility at home, to find a father that is capable and a mother that is caring, and to play with friends in parks and amusement parks. We want the child to remain attached to the merry world of childhood.

The harsh circumstances have forced Palestinian children into early political awareness, national identification, taking on adult responsibilities, and beating adults in the field of battle. Today, these children need our care and need for the cycle of violence to stop here so that the future generations don't remain hostage to it.