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Children as Victims and Activists in the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

Children, in particular Palestinian children, have been on the front lines of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, subject to shootings, bombings, recruitment for terrorism, detentions and other severe security measures. Under the Israeli military occupation, Palestinian children living in the West Bank and Gaza have experienced cycles of violence, exploitation, targeted shootings and collective punishment. Within West Bank and East Jerusalem, Palestinian children and youth participating in actions such as demonstrations, throwing stones or attempted assaults have been subject to maiming, detention and extrajudicial killings. Jewish children and youth living within Israel have experienced rocket attacks, targeted terrorist attacks and cycles of violence which, in turn, serve as the justification for security measures that infringe on the protection of Palestinians, including children. For Palestinian youth living in better living conditions within Israel, recent political action has involved greater solidarity and cross-border joint action with Palestinian youth in the Occupied Territories in the West Bank and Gaza. Increasing numbers of Palestinian youth have become engaged in both non-violent activism and violent actions. Although worlds and territories apart, social media has deepened connections between youth where borders and walls are

meaningless. Right wing Zionists and Jewish settlement youth have also become more engaged through Israeli flag marches through Palestinian neighbourhoods and harassment of Palestinians. Thus, violent and non-violent activism has become more popular among youth even by those not directly affected by the conflict.

From kindergarten, Palestinian and Israeli children are most commonly raised to become either soldiers or freedom fighters. Indeed, studies demonstrate that conflict-supporting collective narratives of the ethos of conflict and collective memory are already transmitted in Jewish kindergartens, especially through national ceremonies and celebrations of holidays (Nasie et al. 2015). Although children have different experiences depending on their parents and schools, participation in boy scouts, military camps for Jewish kids or Zionist flag events such as on Jerusalem day, many state and private activities work to socialize Israeli children. Beginning in most Israeli kindergartens and public schools, militancy is glorified and group actions and goals are justified.

Stories about Jewish holidays that glorify wars, military victories and military heroes as well as traumatic events are being told already in kindergartens (Nasie et al. 2015). By 16 and a half, Israeli children are officially the property of the Israeli army and begin their recruitment, capacity tests and socialization into the military.

Palestinian youth, on the other hand, commonly become engaged in activism at an early age. Increasing numbers of Palestinian children living under the occupation do not feel like they have a childhood and are willing, fearing or expecting to die. Communal violence, harassment, settlement attacks, passing daily through military checkpoints, shootings, house evictions and demolitions have a continuous disruptive impact on the lives of Palestinian children (Defence for Children International 2023). Increasing engagement of Palestinian youth in violent and non-violent activism has made them a target for the Israeli military forces. For security personnel and much of the leadership, children of the 'other' are commonly considered to belong to the enemy, making the difference between adults and minors almost irrelevant (Reenen 2006). The Office for the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSGCAC) has expressed many concerns to both Israel and the relevant Palestinian authorities regarding violence and killing of

children by Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), exploitation of children by Islamic extremist groups and overall lack of security for children in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict (UN Children Report 2016). This chapter will highlight Palestinian and Israeli principles and practice, focusing on safety and protection of children or those under the age of 18. The final part of the chapter will examine perceptions and justifications for the lack of protection for kids and offer recommendations for the future.

Principles

As discussed in previous chapters, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is a context that is particularly problematic for vulnerable populations. The principles discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 hold true for children as when it comes to protection, the distinction between children and adults is currently negligible, especially for those living under the military occupation. Children, however, should be afforded additional protection as they are more vulnerable to attacks and exploitation. Children living within a violent conflict, including within the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, are easy targets for exploitation by militants or the state. Social media has also made it easier to reach and recruit pre-teens and teens. Children and youth are not without agency, and many Palestinian youth choose to participate in violent and non-violent resistance. Militancy can be attractive to children because it can provide meaning, group membership support and options that civilian life does not afford (Spitka 2018). As will be discussed, Palestinian perpetrators have also commonly witnessed traumatic events within their homes and community.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) highlighted four key principles: protection rights, survival and development, non-discrimination and child participation (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action 2019). Israel ratified the Convention in 1991 but has been criticized for not upholding its principles. UNICEF criticized Israel for its failure to create a government-appointed commission on children's rights or adopt a national children's rights strategy or programme (UNICEF 2015). Israel claims that the Convention does not apply in the West Bank and does not define Palestinians under the age

of 16 in the Occupied territories as children, even though Israeli law defines a child as being under 18, in line with the Convention. The lack of protection, in particular for Palestinian children living under the occupation, has raised many alarms. The current age of responsibility for Palestinian children living under Israeli occupation is 12. However, Palestinian children under 12 have also been taken into custody by Israeli military without their parents' knowledge, and as young as 12 have been jailed without charges, adequate trial or representation. According to UNICEF, in no other country are children systematically tried by juvenile military courts, which fall short of providing the necessary guarantees to ensure respect for their rights (UNICEF 2013). The Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed 'its deepest concern about the reported practice of torture and ill-treatment of Palestinian children arrested, prosecuted and detained by the military and the police' (UNICEF 2015). The detentions of Palestinian children have taken place primarily within the occupied territory, however, in 2015 the Israeli Knesset approved a new bill that allowed a child "terrorist" as young as 12 to be also jailed within Israel.

Another sphere that is of significant concern both in principle and in practice is the shooting and killing of child demonstrators and suspected perpetrators who do not pose a serious threat. As with adult victims of shootings, the acts are conducted with impunity, are justified by perpetrators and politicians and seldom investigated. Israel treats Palestinian suspects of terrorism who are minors in the same way as adults. Palestinian armed groups equally make little distinction between a minor and an adult, particularly if they live in a Jewish settlement.

Practice

The realities and general safety and protection are dramatically different for Israeli and Palestinian children. While Jewish children living in Israel are seldom directly targeted, Palestinian children living under the military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza are commonly injured and killed during demonstrations, violent escalations or in indiscriminate

shootings. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), between 2008 and the end of 2021, 333 Palestinian boys and 20 girls were killed (OCHA 2023). The majority were killed in Gaza with launched explosives or live bullets. During the same time period, 27,471 Palestinian boys and 2,527 girls were also injured. A majority of the injuries were from tear gas inhalation, rubber bullets and live ammunition. Palestinian minors made up almost one quarter of all Palestinian injuries and many of the injuries create permanent disabilities. The incidents listed involve only direct confrontations and do not include death or injuries from other conflict-related sources including access to medical treatment, injuries from unexploded ordnances and collapse of tunnels.

In order to examine the well-being of children living inside Israel, it's pertinent to distinguish between Jewish and Palestinian (Israeli Arab) kids living within Israel, and Palestinian kids living in East Jerusalem without Israeli citizenship and under occupation in West Bank and Gaza. Although the number of injuries of children and youth within Israel are marginal compared to areas under military occupation, the violence and terrorist attacks are related to events in Occupied Territories. Cycles of escalation also impact on Israeli kids living in Jewish settlements and draconian security measures against Palestinian teens. According to OCHA, between 2008 and the end of 2021, 10 Israeli boys and 4 girls were killed in conflict-related incidents between Palestinians and Israelis (OCHA 2023). Most of those were living within Israeli settlements and were killed in clashes or in terrorist attacks. In addition, 482 Israeli kids were injured (OCHA 2023).

In the last decade, there has also been a substantial growth in youth activism within Arab-Palestinian society in Israel on political and social issues (Massalha et al. 2017). Children are dramatically impacted by different legal statuses and realities. Although both Jewish and Palestinian children have been targeted in incidents within Israel, most of the conflict-related deaths and injuries of children, including during demonstrations or escalations, involved Palestinian (Arab-Israeli) children, mostly living in Jerusalem (ACRI 2020). The parents of children injured or killed within Israel have access to legal representation and the

Israeli legal justice system. While Israeli children have legal rights, Palestinian children living under the Occupation in Gaza and West Bank are subject to military rule and military courts, where the current age of responsibility is 12 years. Palestinian Islamic groups such as Hamas as well as Israeli military authorities in the Occupied Territories officially consider Palestinian children over 16 as adults.

Palestinian youth have not only been victims but also been acclaimed as heroes domestically and internationally. Palestinian 15-year-old teen protester Ahed Tamimi gained worldwide attention after being jailed for slapping an Israeli soldier. She became a household name and a resistance icon not only among Palestinians but also among some leftist Israeli youth who would attempt to look like her. Indeed, in Jerusalem in order to look cool and tough, some Israeli teens began dressing to look like Palestinian teens, commonly attracting the attention of Israeli security. Subsequent sections will conduct an overview of current protection of children focused on (a) activism, shootings and killings, (b) children's intifada, (c) arrests and detentions, (d) recruitment for terrorism and (e) children inside Gaza.

Shooting and Maiming of Palestinian Children—East Jerusalem, West Bank and Gaza

Shooting and maiming of Palestinian children have been a focus of much external criticism and little internal investigation. Shooting rubber bullets and live ammunition at Palestinian youth while they are demonstrating has resulted in many serious injuries and deaths in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. More than 217 boys and 14 girls have been killed by live ammunition since 2000 (Defence for Children International [2023](#)). Numerous incidents have been related to recent Gaza protests that began on 30 March 2018. The non-violent demonstrations that took place close to the separation fence between Gaza and Israel drew tens of thousands of unarmed protesters including children. The shooting of the demonstrators resulted in hundreds of deaths including

of at least 72 children. Israeli forces positioned snipers on the other side of the fence and the rules of engagement permitted live fire at demonstrators who approached within 100 metres of the fence. A UN investigating commission into the fatalities and injuries noted that ‘members of the Israeli security forces, in the course of their response to the demonstrations, killed and gravely injured civilians who were neither directly participating in hostilities nor posing an imminent threat’. It noted that intentionally killing a civilian not directly participating in hostilities is a war crime (UN Human Rights Council 2019).

Within Israel, the majority of the conflict-related deaths and injuries of children, including during demonstrations or escalations, involved Palestinian (Arab–Israeli) children in Jerusalem (ACRI 2020). There is seldom an investigation into the shooting of demonstrators even though many of the injuries resulted in death or permanent disabilities. Israel justifies its harsh responses against Palestinian children and youth by accusing Palestinians of not caring about the welfare of the kids and using their children as terrorists or as human shields. Subsequent to the 2014 Gaza war, dozens of children have been killed in the West Bank and Jerusalem while participating in demonstrations, crossing checkpoints or when involved or suspected of being involved in attacks against Israelis. The 2014 Gaza war and its unedited coverage in social media had a strong impact on the young population in West Bank, East Jerusalem and within the Israeli-Arab community in Israel and served to ignite the ‘children’s intifada’.

‘Children’s Intifada’

The wave of youth violence during 2015 and 2017, commonly labelled as the ‘knife’ or ‘children’s intifada’, refers to the attacks by mostly young Palestinians living in Israel and Occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank against Israeli civilians and security personnel. According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the height of the attacks between October 2015 and October 2016, there were at least 166 stabbing attacks and 89 attempted stabbings attacks mostly conducted by Palestinian youth (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022). According to

the Ministry, 31 Israeli civilians were killed in the attacks, which also includes car ramming but does not include the perpetrators. The attacks took place after the 2014 Gaza war and subsequent clashes and involved mostly youth including children as young as 12. Tensions ran high across the Occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem and included widespread demonstrations and daily clashes. Dozens of Palestinians, including youth and children, were also killed in the West Bank and East Jerusalem while participating in demonstrations and crossing checkpoints.

The children's intifada was not organized or directed and although tensions were high, it came as a surprise to all authorities. Most of the stabbing incidents were linked to lone-wolf attacks—individuals not influenced by or working for a particular terrorist organization or a national group. IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot noted that there is no early warning when it comes to random knife attacks. “We have had 101 such attacks over the past three months,” he said, “and have not been able to provide a warning in a single place” (Goodman 2016). Many of the youths who attacked Israelis also went out of their way to distance themselves from their Palestinian leadership who they considered corrupt. At the funerals of the young martyrs, the bodies of the boys or girls were not draped in Hamas or Fatah flags but rather the Palestinian flag linking the events to the Palestinian national movement. In most cases, the youths appeared to be enraged by events of the Gaza war or other violent events against Palestinian civilians, which they witnessed personally or on social or public media and acted in revenge. Interviews of some perpetrators with the media, NGO's and Israeli intelligence services confirmed these as being primary motivations.

For example, on October 12, 2015, two cousins Hassan, aged 15, and Ahmed, aged 13, took knives from their Jerusalem homes and attacked and injured civilians in a Jewish settlement of Pisgat Ze'ev. They stabbed and injured two Israelis including a 13-year-old Jewish boy and were shot. Hassan was killed by the police, while Ahmed survived being hit by a club and a car. As he lay bleeding on the road, a mob gathered around with one-person videotaped yelling ‘die, you son of a whore’ (Brooks 2017). Apparently, the East Jerusalem Palestinian boys decided to attack Jewish civilians in a settlement without knowledge from anyone, agreeing beforehand that they would only target army aged men and not women

or children. According to Ahmed, his cousin had said ‘Let’s go scare them as they scare us’ (Brooks 2017). In an interview, their uncle who still could not believe what the boys had done said: “Our children don’t have normal childhoods...from the minute they open their eyes they wake up into a reality of checkpoints, soldiers, settlers insulting their mom. They see the news from Gaza, children like them, bombed and homeless. They hear about a boy their age, burned alive by Israelis. They are sad and afraid. It’s not a healthy environment” (Brooks 2017).

Young attackers were commonly impacted by news and social media. A Shabak press release of a well-known case where a 15-year-old stabbed and killed a mother of six inside a settlement, noted that the youth admitted to making a decision to attack an Israeli after to watching Palestinian television portraying Israel as ‘killing Palestinian young people’ (Goodman 2016). The youth involved in acts of terrorism would typically have an awareness that death was a likely outcome of an attack against an Israeli, and in some cases, this was also a goal. Although the two cases above received much attention in Israeli media because Israelis were killed or injured, in most cases, the lightly armed teens aiming to hurt Israelis were not successful in causing any injuries and were commonly killed in the process. Some attacks by Palestinian youth have been attributed to suicide attempts by teens lacking opportunities or having personal or social problems, knowing they will likely be swiftly killed if they take out a knife or scissors in front of an Israeli soldiers or a security guard (Levi 2016). For example, thirteen-year-old Bara’a Ramadan Owaisi from Qalqilya had approached guards at a checkpoint in the northern West Bank without a weapon but was not adhering to orders to stop. She was shot in the leg and told the guards she ‘came to die’ (*Times of Israel* 2018). Confronting Israeli soldiers at checkpoint has been a common way for Palestinian young teens to commit suicide. Youth have also been shot or killed for looking or acting suspicious, which has been deadly for people including children with mental disabilities. Even without a weapon, Palestinian youth may be shot and killed if they do not follow careful instructions, especially those with other impairments such as hearing loss.

Israeli security had dealt with the rise of incidents by Palestinian youth in several different ways including monitoring social media, arresting

individuals and armed confrontation with the youth including injuring and killing. Teens found to be holding knives or scissors as young as 14 were killed on the spot by Israeli security or vigilante civilians. General escalation in violence, political incitement, influence of social media and vigilantism has all contributed to the killing of the teens. During 2015, 30 Palestinian children (25 boys and 5 girls) were killed and at least 1,735 injured (1,687 boys and 48 girls) in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (UN Children Report 2016). The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) were responsible for the killing of most of the children in the West Bank. Human rights organizations noted that police officers and soldiers were quick to shoot to kill instead of acting in a manner appropriate to the nature of each incident and have criticized political and public support for extrajudicial killings (Adalah 2015).

Arrests and Detentions of Palestinian Minors

The realities of the military occupation, teenager activism and fear of recruitment of Palestinian teens by radical groups have made minors one of the primary targets for arrest and detentions by Israel. According to UNICEF, approximately 7,000 Palestinian children have been detained, interrogated, prosecuted and/or imprisoned within the Israeli Military Justice System in the past 10 years (UNICEF 2013). This is an average of 700 kids per year or 2 children per day and rising. The majority of children on trial in Israeli military courts have been charged with throwing stones. In 2016, the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) passed amendments to the penal code increasing the maximum sentence for throwing stones to 20 years. While a child between the age of 12 and 13 can receive a maximum sentence of 6 months, a teen between the ages of 14 to 15 charged with throwing stones can receive a maximum penalty of 20 years (Alyan and Russo 2016).

Many arrests have taken place at night and Palestinian children report being blindfolded, painfully hand-tied, strip searched and subject to physical violence. UNICEF has identified practices “that amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention against

Torture” (UNICEF 2013, p. 9). Palestinian children under 12 have also been taken into custody without their parents’ knowledge, and as young as 12 have been jailed without charges, adequate trial or representation. In 416 out of 429 cases (97% cases) of arrest of Palestinian children during 2016, the children were denied access to legal counsel prior to and during interrogation and did not have a family member present during questioning (Defence for Children International 2016, p. 11). The Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed “its deepest concern about the reported practice of torture and ill-treatment of Palestinian children arrested, prosecuted and detained by the military and the police” (UNICEF 2015, p. 4).

Exploitation and Recruitment for Terrorism

For Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the recruitment of children particularly in Gaza but also within West Bank and inside Israel is an ongoing phenomenon. Palestinian children and youth are also vulnerable to being exploited by members of their families, the community, in schools, and manipulated through cultural activities and social networks by paramilitary organizations. Inside the Palestinian territories, Hamas runs mosques, schools, orphanages, summer camps, sports leagues, student unions and cultural activities, which are used to socialize young children and youth (Levitt 2004). Photos of so-called martyrs are commonly displayed in schools and other public areas. In 2015, the Izz el-Deen al-Qassam Brigades ran a military camp for 25,000 children and young people between 15 and 21 years of age in Gaza (UN Children Report 2016, p. 14). The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine reportedly held a graduation ceremony during a camp for girls, which included training in weapons (UN Children Report 2016).

Military Camps for Israeli Children and Youth

Military training camps for Jewish teens have become increasingly popular in Israel. Camps provide basic training, military-style obstacle courses and teaching children how to fire semi-automatic (paintball)

weapons (Memo 2019). Some camps focus on urban warfare, cyber warfare and attract Israeli kids wishing to become accepted into elite IDF units. One of the most sought-after military units is the infamous Unit 8200, the Israeli army's NSA equivalent known to secure its veterans lucrative careers in the Israeli tech sector. Tech-learning kids can now use their summer vacations to train in thwarting cyberattacks and other skills that could help them secure a place at Unit 8200 and other top cyberwarfare units when they reach enlistment age (Bahur-Nir 2019). Some camps offer daily activities in a special set designed for urban warfare: densely-built houses, burned vehicles, and sniper posts (Bahur-Nir 2019). Although the camps are meant to empower, teach skills and train kids for the army, they are run by former military commanders and tend to glorify militancy. Justifications for what the children may end up doing while being soldiers are already disseminated at these summer camps for the teens and pre-teens who attend.

Children in Gaza Wars

Children are most vulnerable in Gaza, where they make up close to 40% of the 1.8 million people living under cycles of violence including bombardment, harsh conditions of the occupation and a Hamas led militant regime. Since 2007, the Gaza Strip has been under a tightly controlled land, sea and air blockade. The 2008/9, 2012 and 2014 Gaza wars resulted in many civilian deaths, destruction of homes, schools and hospitals. Since Gaza is closed and there are few shelters or safe areas, children are exposed to violence during escalations, as well as within schools and their homes. During the 2008 Operation Cast Lead, Israel launched massive airstrikes killing 1,400 people, including up to 431 children (Amnesty 2009). The attack was a response to the increasing number of Qassam rockets launched from Gaza targeting southern Israeli towns and killing or maiming dozens of Israeli civilians. The subsequent UN inquiry documented many atrocities including the killing of children, the launching of attacks from within civilian areas, the use of white phosphorus and using children as human shields (UN Human Rights Council 2009).

The 2014 Gaza war resulted in more civilian deaths, external investigations and accusations of war crimes and once again little accountability or repercussions for perpetrators. During July and August, Palestinian militants indiscriminately fired 4,881 rockets and 1,753 mortars towards Israel, killing 6 civilians (UN Human Rights Council 2015). Alarms, safe rooms and the air defence system (Iron Dome) prevented the loss of more Israeli lives; however, many civilians were under the threat of bombardment and unable to move freely. Studies have shown that children, especially younger children exposed to missile attacks, suffer from post-traumatic stress symptoms (Miller-Graff and Cummings 2017).

Israeli justification for the military campaign was the kidnapping and murder of 3 Israeli teens and the ongoing rocket fire launched by armed groups from Gaza. In the 2-month escalation leading up to the Gaza war, Israeli forces fatally shot two 15 and one 17-year-old unarmed Palestinian teens, Palestinian men killed three Israeli settler teens (16, 16 & 19), and Israeli settlers kidnapped and burned alive a 15-year-old Palestinian teen (Defence for Children International 2020). All of the teens were victims of indiscriminate targeting or revenge attacks. The killings of the teens sparked public outrage and led to massive Israeli retributions.

Israeli bombardment of Gaza destroyed residential buildings, hospitals, schools, much of the infrastructure and displaced close to a third of the population (OCHA 2015). The war resulted in the death of 551 Palestinian children and 1 Israeli child. At least 2,955 Palestinian children were injured in Gaza with up to one-third (1000) disabled permanently (UN Children Report 2015). An investigation by the United Nations Human Rights Council found serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by both Israel and Palestinian militants that were investigated as potential war crimes (Inquiry 2015). Defence for Children International reported that at least 7 cases of Palestinian children, aged 9 to 17, were used as human shields by the IDF during the 2014 Gaza Conflict (Defence for Children International 2015a). The kids were forced at gunpoint to search buildings, tunnels, and held in captivity for days in dire conditions without the knowledge of their families (Defence for Children International 2015a, 2015b).

Schools were used as shelters for internally displaced women and children; however, many were directly hit by missiles or artillery. A UNWRA

school in Beit Hanoun was struck by several missiles, which killed 11 people, including 7 children. A school in Jabalia was also struck by artillery killing 15, including 4 children (OCHA 2015, p. 20). The targeting of schools was blamed on Israel as well as Hamas. The UN found evidence that Hamas deliberately used Gaza's civilian population, including children, to shield military assets (UN Human Rights Council 2015). UNRWA announced the discovery of approximately 20 rockets hidden in one of its vacant schools (UNWRA 2014).

Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) claimed that measures such as leaflets recommending evacuation and a small blast on the roof were intended as warning for people to evacuate residential buildings targeted for bombardment. However, civilians had nowhere to flee and in densely populated areas, the 'small blasts' created confusion as individuals did not realize their building was targeted, or were hurt or killed while escaping the building (UN Children Report 2015).¹ The 2014 Gaza war had an unprecedented effect on children's sense of well-being and security. UNICEF had estimated that about 373,000 children in Gaza Strip required specialized psychosocial support (OCHA 2023). The psychological impact on children subsequent to the war include: excessive nervousness, difficulty in concentrating, sleep disturbances, eating problems, fear, withdrawal and violent behaviour (Miller-Graff and Cummings 2017).

Beyond the deadly escalations, life for Palestinian children and teens living in Gaza offers little hope. Children and youth are not given opportunities to escape Gaza for education elsewhere. The situation is worse for girls and LGBTQ. Girls are married off at a young age due to poverty and lack of opportunities. The strict social codes of segregation imply that women and girls are confined to the private sphere and are commonly reliant on male family members for their livelihoods as well as access to critical information about the security situation, humanitarian assistance and other services (UN Women/UN OCHA 2016). Gaza has one of the highest incidents of violence against women and girls in the world (Palestinian Stats 2011). Sawa, a Palestinian NGO that runs a helpline for women and kids, noted a dramatic increase of cases of violence

¹ UN Report, A/HRC/29/CRP.4, p. 65.

against women and children during conflict escalations (Otero 2012). Rapes and abuses against girls are seldom investigated and commonly girls are punished, killed or forced to marry their abusers. Coming out as an LGBTQ person in Gaza under Hamas is a death sentence. The police do not act, domestic violence is not criminalized and the only institutions providing protection for women and children are civil society organizations, which are also vulnerable to attacks (Spitka 2019).

Perceptions & Justifications

Israeli leadership has justified its harsh security responses against Palestinian kids and youth by accusing Hamas, and Palestinians in general, of using their own children as human shields. A common argument is that Palestinians do not love their children and send them out of neglect, or sacrifice them to make Israel look bad. To explore justification of violence against children, I utilize Maynard's typology of six recurring justification mechanisms: (a) dehumanization, (b) guilt attribution, (c) threat construction, (d) de-agentification (militarily necessary), (e) virtue talk and (f) future bias (Maynard 2014, p. 829). As noted by Maynard, the first three are about the victims, portraying them as subhuman, guilty or threatening, which can justify their exclusion from protection. The last three are about the perpetrators, framing the violence as a military necessity, glorifying the perpetrators or portraying the violence as essential for the future well-being of the group or the state. This can justify the perpetrators from repercussions for the action.

Dehumanization of victims has been the focus of much attention by theorists as well as practitioners monitoring incidents of dehumanization within the media in potential or ongoing conflicts. Most cases of genocide have been attributed to high levels of dehumanization frequently manufactured by extremist leadership (Adelman 2005). Groups under threat of genocide have commonly been categorized by enemies as low life such as bugs, vermin or a virus. Dehumanization has also been used

to justify violence against children. Nazis began to discuss killing of children even prior to the 1940s. In 1929, Hitler said at the Nazi Party Conference in Nuremberg, the ‘annual removal of 700,000–800,000 of the weakest of a million babies meant an increase in the power of the nation and not a weakening’ (Burleigh 1990).

Guilt attribution focuses on ascribing guilt to a collective by portraying the whole group as guilty of a crime (Maynard 2014, p. 380). Portraying all Palestinians guilty of collective terrorism or a crime is quite common. Collective punishment is frequently linked to Gaza, West Bank and East Jerusalem neighbourhoods. When a whole family, a village, a neighbourhood, a city, territory is labelled as guilty, this serves to justify collective punishment. Thus, violence against individuals in the ethno/national group can be justified as legitimate. Another important element of justification of violence against victims is *threat-construction*, where the victim is portrayed as a threat. Individuals are assigned a threatening status because of their connection to the threatening collective. As noted by Maynard, “threat construction has three central effects: establishing a clear motivation for killing victims, framing them as legitimate targets and reframing perpetrators of legitimately acting in self-defence” (Maynard 2014, p. 831). Palestinians, even Palestinian youth, are commonly perceived as threatening by Jewish Israeli population.

The remaining justifications are related to the perpetrator. *De-agentification* refers to the portrayal of the perpetrators as lacking agency or choice in the prevention of violence or atrocity (Maynard 2014, p. 831). Violence, including killing, is portrayed as unavoidable or a military necessity for the protection of a group or nation. *Virtuetalk* refers to positive representation of the perpetrator. As will be discussed in the next section, Palestinian attackers are commonly referred to as Martyrs, attaching a positive sense of purpose to the violence they have perpetrated. Finally, *future-bias* refers to justification of violence and atrocities for the benefit of the future of the group or the nation.

There are several additional factors that can contribute to the justification of harming or killing of children. First, adultification or the portrayal of children as adults. Many cases of exoneration have been due to the apparent inability of the perpetrator to distinguish between an adult and a child. Second, labelling children as terrorists, without

investigation into the details of the incident. Lastly, blaming the parents for incitement, such as their failure to make sure the child is kept at home/school or out of harm's way. The following section examines public speeches of religious, military and political Palestinian and Israeli leadership. It moves beyond the typology to include other justifications of violence against Israeli and Palestinian children.

Israeli Leadership Justification of Violence Against Palestinian Children

Many speeches by Israeli leadership about welfare of Palestinian children are focused on blaming the Palestinians for the death of their own children. Former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir famously said: "We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children. We cannot forgive them for forcing us to kill their children. We will only have peace with the Arabs when they love their children more than they hate us" (Meir 1972).

Dehumanization has been discussed extensively in the literature and has been quite relevant to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. According to Maoz, dehumanization of the Palestinians facilitates aggressive activities by the Israelis (Maoz and McCauley 2008). Kane noted that the circumstances of Israel's birth required that the indigenous population be rendered into a form where their humanity could be compromised and their rights accordingly disregarded and that the need to defend against the guilt engendered by this requires their continued demonization (Kane 2005).

Israel has justified its attacks against Palestinian civilians by accusing Hamas, and Palestinians in general, of using their children as human shields. This suggests that the Palestinians have no problem sending their sons and daughters to the front lines (Gordon and Perugini 2018).

In one of many Benjamin Netanyahu video clips on this topic, the Israeli Prime Minister notes:

A Palestinian father holds up his 4-year-old son. He pleads with Israeli border police to kill his own child. He shouts: shoot this little boy. His boy. ...Encouraging someone to murder a child let alone your child is

probably the most inhumane thing a person can do...If parents don't respect their own children's lives how will they respect the lives of their neighbours? (Netanyahu 2016)

Guilt attribution is also quite common, portraying all Palestinians or certain territorial areas such as Gaza as guilty of collective terrorism or a crime. When a whole family, a village, a neighbourhood, a city, territory or a nation is targeted guilty, this can help to justify collective punishment. Danny Danon, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations (UN) called on the Security Council to condemn the Hamas for its use of children as human shields.

During these protests, expected to escalate as part of the 'Days of Rage' declared by the Palestinian leadership, Hamas, the internationally recognized terrorist organization, plans to exploit innocent Palestinian children as human shields and place them directly in harm's way. (Danon 2018)

Threat construction is prevalent within the Israeli ideological narrative as all Palestinians are commonly labelled as threatening. Children and teenagers are not exempt from this categorization. During the 2015 escalation subsequent to the Gaza war, Palestinian youth attempted to stab Israelis, resulting in harsh security response. The Knesset also approved a new bill that allowed a child "terrorist" as young as 12 to be jailed within Israel. The justification for the new legislation noted:

The seriousness that we attach to terror and acts of terror that cause bodily injury and property damage, and the fact that these acts of terror are being carried out by minors, demands a more aggressive approach including toward minors who are convicted. (Dearden 2016)

Anat Berko, a member of Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, said that the law is borne of necessity,

A society is allowed to protect itself. To those who are murdered with a knife in the heart it does not matter if the child is 12 or 15. (Dearden 2016)

Many of the teenagers armed with scissors or knives were killed on the spot. Several members of the Israeli government praised the extrajudicial killings by police, private security guards and vigilante civilians. Interior Security Minister Gilad Arden stated that “every terrorist should know that he will not survive the attack he is about to commit”. MK Yair Lapid declared that you have to shoot to kill anyone who pulls out a knife or screwdriver. “Don’t hesitate. Even at the start of an attack, shooting to kill is correct. If someone is brandishing a knife, shoot him. It’s part of Israel’s deterrence” (Lapid 2016).

Senior IDF officers took a more moderate tone to the politicians. IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot emphasized that “I don’t want to see a soldier empty a magazine [to shoot] a young girl with scissors” (Amir and Hashavua 2016).

Netanyahu:

But I think President Abbas has to stop this incitement. You just saw examples of him lying, barefaced lies. “An innocent child executed by Israelis.” No. He’s not innocent and he wasn’t executed. He tried to murder innocent people, almost succeeded. ...That violence has picked up, by Palestinian youngsters, and they go out and murder Jews. And they murder peace, of course. (Netanyahu 2015)

The Israeli military claims that civilian casualties are unavoidable in Gaza’s dense neighbourhoods, where militants often fire rockets from residential areas. In addition, Hamas is considered a cruel enemy that makes a tough response necessary including the death of civilians:

Hamas has violated every ceasefire proposal. We face a cruel enemy whose brutality is directed not only against us, against our civilians, but is also directed against his own civilians. It exploits their civilians in order for there to be more and more victims even as they send fire and death toward us. (Netanyahu 2014)

IDF shooting of unarmed demonstrations has been framed as a military necessity in order to show force and achieve victory. Former Southern Command IDF commander Brigadier-General Zvika Fogel noted “They [Hamas] have patience and the only way to kill that patience is to bring

it to their homes and not wait for a tunnel, kite, or rocket. We need to give them a bullet in the head and ensure quiet” (Cohen 2018). The Israeli general has confirmed that when snipers stationed along Israel’s boundary with Gaza shoot at children, they are doing so deliberately, under clear and specific orders though not necessarily with orders to kill.

I know how these orders are given. I know how a sniper does the shooting. I know how many authorizations he needs before he receives an authorization to open fire. It is not the whim of one or the other sniper who identifies the small body of a child now and decides he’ll shoot. Someone marks the target for him very well and tells him exactly why one has to shoot and what the threat is from that individual. And to my great sorrow, sometimes when you shoot at a small body and you intended to hit his arm or shoulder, it goes even higher. (Fogel 2018)

Institutional discrimination plays a fundamental role not only in justification of the incident but prevention of compensation. In the 2015 Duma village arson attack, members of a Jewish terrorist organization *Revolt* burned homes, killing sleeping members of the Dawabsheh family, including an infant. Subsequent to public pressure including a petition, two individuals were persecuted for the murder. The only survivor of the attack was 4-year-old Ahmed Dawabsheh, who was orphaned and left with permanent disabilities. Former Minister of Defence Avigdor Lieberman noted that Ahmed would not receive compensation. According to Lieberman, Israel cannot recognize the child—Dawabsheh—as a victim of terrorism as long as he does not have Israeli citizenship or live in Israel (Woodliff 2017).

A common implication is that Palestinians do not love their children and send them out of neglect or sacrifice them to make Israel look bad. During the protest in 2018, IDF disseminated clips on social media of young children at protests. One short clip plays a lullaby interrupted by the sound of gunfire and rhetorically asks: “Where are the children of Gaza today?” Showing children amid the protesters, it then displays the word “here” (Gordon and Perugini 2018). Current PM Naftali Bennett went as far to argue in a government cabinet meeting that Palestinians are not preventing their children from committing stabbing attacks because

they know parents of slain assailants receive a grant and a stipend from the Palestinian Authority (Ravid 2016). Asked in 2018, if he would instruct the army to “shoot to kill” policy against children breaching the Gaza border, Naftali Bennett retorted: “They are not children — they are terrorists. We are fooling ourselves. I see the photos” (Staff, *Times of Israel* 2018). He also asserted that the army should shoot to kill anyone sending incendiary devices over the border. “If someone sends arson balloons from Gaza, we should shoot to kill...” (Staff, *Times of Israel* 2018). For Israeli top leadership, there is no apology, punishment, investigation or regret for the shooting or killing of Palestinian children, which is most commonly blamed on military necessity and Palestinian neglect.

Palestinian Leadership Justification of Violence Against Children

Although a majority of Palestinian leadership speeches focus on blaming Israelis for the death of Palestinian children, there is an expectedly significant difference in the justifications of exploitation and killing of Israeli children between Hamas and the PLO. Still, Hamas has in recent years adopted a more moderate tone, distancing itself from terrorist organizations the likes of ISIS. However, it continues to justify exploitation of Palestinian children and killing of Israeli teens who live in the settlements. Seeking international support and empathy, the PLO leadership, under Mahmoud Abbas, has adopted an internationally sanctioned moderate position, making a strong stand against terrorism while promoting and justifying Palestinian children’s engagement only within the framework of non-violent resistance. Although children have remained in the spotlight and part of the Palestinian struggle, their roles, especially in the West Bank, have changed.

Virtue talk has traditionally been a common element in the justification of violence by Palestinian leadership. Perpetrators of violent terrorist acts, including teens, are publicly portrayed as martyrs. Arafat argued that Palestinian children are the heroes of the resistance against the Israeli occupation, justifying using children for resistance against the Israeli Jewish army. Arafat said that “Palestinian children are the freedom

fighters against the Occupation” (Wafa 2015). Although speeches and materials glorifying martyrdom, such as “death [of a teenager] as a Martyr is the path to excellence and greatness” (Wafa, 11 July 2016) are still common, the current leadership of Palestinian Authority (PA) has taken a far more moderate tone.

The June 2014 kidnapping and the murder of the three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank was a significant event for the Israeli public and leadership that was one of the sparks that escalated into the 2014 Gaza war. Although the official Hamas response was ambiguous and initially did not take responsibility for the attack, the leadership justified and praised the murder. The head of the political wing of Hamas, Khaled Mashal used “threat construction” when he labelled the two 16-year-old and the 19-year-old teens as “settlers and soldiers in the Israeli army” (Miller, 2014).

Blessed be the hands that captured them...This is a Palestinian duty, the responsibility of the Palestinian people. Our prisoners must be freed; not Hamas’s prisoners — the prisoners of the Palestinian people.

The three were not ‘youths’, as Israel calls them, but first and foremost settlers ... and not even regular settlers, but armed ones. (Miller, 2014)

Mashal also referred to the Palestinian men who murdered the Israeli teens as “martyrs”, and employed “guilt attribution” when he said “But Israel is killing our sons all the time” (Mashal, 21 October 2014). While at a conference in Turkey, senior Hamas official Salah Arouri boasted that the group’s military wing was behind the attack of the Israeli youth.

The al-Qassam’s mujahedeen were the ones to carry out [the abduction] in show of support for the prisoners’ hunger strike. (Khoury 2014)

Abbas denounced the kidnapping and called on Hamas and Israel to refrain from violence (*Haaretz* 2014). Hamas, under the leadership of Political leader Khaled Mashal, has attempted to claim that they do not wish to target civilians, distinguishing itself from terrorist organizations the likes of ISIS, but rather do it out of lack of military weapons and capacity.

We do not target civilians, and we try most of the time to aim at military targets and Israeli bases. But we admit that we have a problem. We do not have sophisticated weapons. We do not have the weapons available to our enemy so aiming is difficult. We do promise you, though, that we will try in the future and we will warn people. We have given warnings to Israeli civilians. We promise that if we get more precise weapons, we will only target military targets. (Mashal, 23 July 2014)

This language is a form of de-agentification. Mashal is blaming his lack of precision weapons for the killing of Israeli civilians including children, which is unavoidable unless Hamas is able to procure more sophisticated military equipment.

Abbas has argued for peaceful resistance for the Palestinians in Gaza and he says that the Palestinian children should not take part in the confrontation with Israel because he doesn't want the 'Palestinian nation to become a deformed nation'. Yet, at the same time, he has called the Palestinian teenager Ahed Tamimi "a model for the Palestinian struggle" (Rasgon, 29 July 2018).

The Palestinian girl Ahed Tamimi is a model for the Palestinian struggle for freedom, independence and the establishment of our independent Palestinian state. (Rasgon, 29 July 2018)

The then sixteen-year-old Ahed Tamimi became a symbol of Palestinian resistance after she slapped an Israel soldier. The slap cost the teenager a year in prison.

Conclusion

Protection of children is a good yardstick by which one can measure the level of protection within a society. It is clear that there is virtually no protection of Palestinian children living under Israel's military occupation. Cycles of violence, detentions without due process and IDF soldiers shooting live bullets at children who do not pose a serious threat has become a common occurrence. António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, said "If there is a hell on earth, it is the

lives of children in Gaza” (Guterres 2021). The most troubling aspect is that these incidents are not investigated thus there is no accountability. Children are also not without agency. Indeed, Palestinian children have become public and active agents of change. Frustrated not only by the Israeli Occupation but also their own leadership which they consider corrupt and ineffective, the Palestinian youth have increasingly been acting independently of the older generation. While Palestinian politicians are divided territorially and between Hamas and Fatah, children and youth are more connected via social media and influence each other. Nonviolent youth demonstrations and resistance in Gaza not only influenced youth in the West Bank but also Hamas. The non-violent public protest along the Gaza border did not begin with Hamas but was accepted by the organization as an effective tool of resistance. Palestinian teen protester Ahed Tamimi was one of the many teens that gained national and worldwide attention for her non-violent activism. Although frequent victims of oppression and violence, Palestinian youth are on the front lines generating unity and hope for change. Protection of children can also be an area of common ground as even the most extreme groups are obligated to protect children to maintain their own support base.

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