

THEY SHOOT CHILDREN, DON'T THEY? Confined Cruelty: Israeli Treatment of Palestinian Minors

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Global Research, April 01, 2012

[Redress.cc](#) 1 April 2012

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

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For many Palestinian children their childhood is lived under a cloak of fear and the threat of violence and abuse at the hands of an armed force that stalks the streets of their homeland.

They shoot children, don't they?

In the 11 years since the year 2000, Israeli forces have killed 1,471 children in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the bulk of whom were aged between 13 and 17 years. The children of Gaza have been and continue to be at greatest risk, with almost a thousand murdered in the last 12 years. Most are shot randomly and indiscriminately, or killed as a result of Israeli air and ground attacks. Around 50 were taken prematurely from their families by unexploded ordnance.

The most recent atrocities against the people of Gaza began on Friday 9 March and resulted in the killing of 25 Palestinians, and come on the back of the massacre that took place in December 2008/January 2009, when a total of 1,417 Palestinians were murdered, of whom 318 were children and 116 women. Fresh in the children's young memories lie the echo of that horrendous time, the constant bombardment, the loss of loved ones and the shootings. Besides the deaths, around 1,000 children were injured in the three-week assault, and many children were left with severe physical disabilities and deep psychological wounds. The mental and emotional effects are more difficult to see and/or to treat than broken bones and scared flesh.

The Gaza Community Health Programme estimates that "half Gaza's children - around 350,000 - will develop some form of post-traumatic stress disorder". This is staggering but unsurprising, and the attacks this March on unarmed civilians will serve to intensify the mental suffering and anguish that these children are living with.

Children make up around 45 per cent of the four million or so total Palestinian population, a fact that terrifies an ageing Israel. And what impact does living under the brutal Israeli occupation have on them? Would they be inclined towards peace and brotherhood? Is tolerance fostered in their hearts and minds through the Israeli occupation, or are the seeds of hate and the desire for revenge being carefully sown?

The violence we see begets not harmony, but further violence. One of the authors of the UN's Goldstone Report, Colonel Desmond Travers, cited a psychiatrist in Gaza as saying: "We already see in our schools in Gaza the next generation of Hamas revolutionaries, children exposed to so much violence they have no option but to terminate their childhood and move into a different frame, and the likelihood is that they will never stabilize." In order

to justify the unjustifiable and the unjust, Israel needs to instil hate into another generation of Palestinians - to maintain their position as the "enemy within", thereby excusing, in some perverted distortion of the facts, its continued aggression, violence and violation of international laws, too many to count.

Intimidation and torture

Palestinian children living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip under the illegal Israeli occupation are subjected to brutal treatment and illegal imprisonment, torture and intimidation by the Israeli security forces. According to a report by Defence for Children International (DCI), "a pattern of systematic ill-treatment emerges, much of which amounts to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, as defined in the UN Convention against Torture, and in some cases, torture - both of which are absolutely prohibited."

Since 1967 Palestinian children and adults have been subjected to Israeli military law, a legal system based on prejudice and short on justice. During this period 726,000 Palestinians have been arrested and detained. The numbers of children arrested and taken from their homes is shocking. According to DCI, in the past 11 years alone "around 7,500 children, some as young as 12 years, are estimated to have been detained, interrogated and imprisoned within this system. This averages out at between 500-700 children per year, or nearly two children each and every day."

Almost a quarter of all children arrested are held in solitary confinement. Children, mainly boys, aged from 12 to 17 years are forcefully taken from their families, often at night, imprisoned, beaten and tortured, intimidated and on occasion subjected to electric shocks. Most children are detained for the terrible crime of throwing stones at soldiers armed with M16 rifles and tear gas.

The Israeli human rights group B'Tselem described the ordeal of one boy, Yahia, aged 15 years. Together with four of his friends, Yahia was arrested and taken to the illegal Israeli settlement of Zuffin. They had their "hands tied behind their backs, they were blindfolded, before being forced to kneel on the ground for several hours". The boys were then taken to a police station and interrogated.

The interrogator grabbed the boy's head and slammed it against the wall, slapping him twice. A short time later he returned holding a small electric shock device [Taser]. "He placed the device on my body and I felt a great powerful shock and my body started shivering. I couldn't feel my arms or legs and I felt extreme pain in my head. I felt I was going to be paralysed, so I decided to confess."

The process of arrests, intimidation and violence is common practice by the Israeli occupation authorities. The kneeling on the ground, the isolation and the use of hand ties and blindfolds are also used extensively against Palestinians.

In 2010 the UN documented 90 cases of "ill treatment" of Palestinian children in Israeli detention, of which 75 had their hands tied behind their backs and were also blindfolded. Almost a third of the children were under 15 years of age. Of the 90 detained, "62 children reported being beaten, 35 children reported position abuse and 16 children were kept in solitary confinement. In three cases, children reported the use of electric shocks on their bodies. Particularly concerning was the fact that there was an increase in documented cases of sexual violence."

All of this contravenes international law and conventions signed and ratified by Israel – and the democratic principles Israel so loudly proclaims. According to Mark Regev, the chief Israeli purveyor of propaganda and deceit and spokesman for Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu said in the Guardian, newspaper: “The test of a democracy is how you treat people incarcerated, people in jail, and especially so with minors.” This is a democracy damned by words of duplicity.

According to the Guardian, when in Israeli custody Palestinian children’s rights are ignored and they are verbally insulted. “You’re a dog” and “son of a whore” are among the commonest insults. Many are exhausted from sleep deprivation. Day after day they are fettered to the chair, then returned to solitary confinement. Eventually, the majority of children sign confessions that they later say were coerced. Among the typical accusations which the Israelis claim “justify” these illegal detentions are throwing stones, or occasionally Molotov cocktails, at soldiers or settlers – both of whom, let us remember, are illegally present on Palestinian land.

In most cases children are held inside Israel itself, which restricts access to legal support and excludes family members from visiting and supporting them. Holding children in prisons inside Israel is in violation of Article 76 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits such transfers. This process of arrests, detention and torture operating inside Israel and outside international and national law offers the victims no legal recourse. According to DCI, “there is a general absence of effective complaint mechanisms”.

Legally binding, illegally bound

The Israeli judicial system, as it currently pertains to Palestinian children, allows illegal practices to take place within settlements and Israeli prisons. International law on the rights of the child, to which Israel is bound, is clear and extensive.

B’Tselem says “Israel signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child in July 1990 and ratified it in August 1991”. According to DCI, all international treatise and conventions signed by Israel safeguard children in conflict but Israel ignores them all. “These treaties relevantly provide that, in all actions concerning children, their best interests shall be a primary consideration.”

Urgent action is required to safeguard the children of Palestine and protect them from the tyranny that is Israeli policy in the occupied territories. The actions of Israel in these territories are vile, murderous, calculated and illegal.

It is the duty of the international community, acting in unity and led by the UN, to stand and act to protect the lives of the innocent men, women and children of Palestine, lifting the shadow of constant fear, intimidation and aggression from their lives. Humanity is one. Together we must stand in the face of injustice, violence and hate to safeguard the lives of the innocent, the oppressed the defenceless.

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