

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict seen from the Arab young child's and parents' eyes...

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Invited address presented at the
WAIMH
Regional Conference, Akko, Israel,
September 2009

INTRODUCTION

Simple, direct questions, asked by Israeli Arab children, reflect best the complexity of the unique problems to which Arab children are confronted in times of exacerbation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

Example 1: During the July 2006 war on Lebanon, when Hizballah missiles reached Arab towns and villages, and killed 19 Arab residents, A 4 year-old boy asked : *“Why is Nasrallah throwing missiles at us? Doesn't he know that we are Arabs? Could it be Israel throwing missiles at us and blaming Nasrallah?”*

Example 2: During the “Cast Lead” operation against the Gaza Strip, a boy of 4.5 years of age asked his mother: *“Why doesn't Israel kill you or Dad or Grandmother? Why does it only kill us, little children?”*.

Example 3: When hearing the explosion of fireworks at a wedding, a 3.5 year-old boy asked: *“Is Israel attacking us?”*.

Example 4: A 4 year old Bedouin boy told his nursery teacher: *“The Palestinians throw stones, but Israel protects us from them”*.

We all learned from D.W. Winnicott's saying: “See not the child by himself, but in the whole context”. In order to understand the uniqueness of the Israeli Arab child during Israeli-Arab wars, I will try to relate, as a whole, the historical, religious, cultural and social context together with the media by which the child grew up in



WAIMH President Antoine Guedeney giving a speech in WAIMH Regional Conference in Akko (September, 2009).

and was affected from, while at the same time emphasizing the factors of psychological resilience and stamina.

“Not the blazing isolated moment, with no before or after, but the whole flaming life at each moment” (T.S. Eliot)

I. THE STATUS OF THE ARAB COMMUNITY IN ISRAEL IN THE HISTORICAL, MEDIA, RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL, AND SOCIETAL CONTEXTS

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Arabs in Israel are in a very unique situation. They are Israeli citizens, as well as Palestinians, and at times of exacerbation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict they are put in a conflicted situation, laden with feelings of confusion, perplexity and frustration. A certain stream among Israeli Arabs considers the situation to be conflicting, charged, confusing, perplexing and frustrating.

A second stream maintains that this situation is supposed to be ideal because they are Israelis experiencing all the Israeli events for better and for worse and that their interest lies in seeing Israel prosperous and in peace. At the same time, since they are also part of the Palestinian people (almost any Arab family in Israel has a first or second degree kinship tie with people living in neighboring countries, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, The West Bank and Gaza Strip), they say “We want it to be good for both, our people and our country.” But, I am sorry to say, this is not a widespread notion, especially among politicians. Israel's discriminatory attitude against its own Arab population, with suspiciousness and exaggerated security concerns (e.g. at the airport) on the one hand, and the backlash of the Arab leadership in Israel on the other hand, lead to establishing and strengthening the first stream and weakening the second one. Thus a dialectical expanse is derived between the Jewish and Arab populations, reinforcing in turn the Israeli authorities' suspiciousness. This has been an ongoing chronic vicious cycle for many years.

Just like war always awakens the collective traumatic anxiety and memories of the Holocaust among Jews (a trauma that is very much present in the everyday life, in peaceful times as well), so it is for the Arab-Palestinians in Israel. War raises *their* collective traumatic anxiety and memory of the “Nakba”. I am not comparing the Nakba with the Holocaust which was the most horrible episode in recent human history. I am only giving a tangible example that should be better understood and recognized: in terms of emotional impact, the core feeling of insecurity is shared by both people. Therefore, the term “transfer for Arabs”, used by some Israeli Jews, raises among Arab adults a very strong existential threat which is transmitted to the children, like the fear of being exterminated is transmitted from one generation to the other among Jews in general, and more specifically in Israel.

2. THE IMPACT OF THE MEDIA

We live in the “electronic media revolution” era. This revolution has far stronger impact in the Arab world than it has in developed countries such as Israel, because media has become a major means of entertainment among Arab populations, as it bypasses the high level of illiteracy, low reading rates (average of 1.25 hours per year in the Arab world, and 6 hours per year in Israel) and lack of enriching cultural activities. A 22% rating is usually considered as maximal. But when MBC1 broadcasted the Ramadan series “Bab el Hara” that rating jumped in the Arab world, including the Arab sector in Israel, to an unprecedented 80%.

In addition, the Arab population in Israel is exposed more to media originating from Arab countries than to the local Israeli one. These channels conquered a hefty place in the hearts and minds of every household member in normal times (in between wars), and formed a continuum in belonging to the Arab nation starting with language, culture, music and religion... This is true for the adults as well as for the children:

A 5 years and half boy from Nazareth who usually watches children programs in Arabic, broadcasted from Arabic TV stations, and is thrilled by these programs. He asks his mother “Whom are we friends with?”, “Where

can we travel to?”, “I want to go to Jeddah?”, “I want to buy games such as those on TV and play like the kids there, they speak the same language I do, and have games that I like too.” (It is important to mention here that this particular child, like other children of his age in the Arab sector in Israel, has not yet been exposed to the Hebrew language, nor to Jewish children, in spite of the closeness of the Arabic neighborhood to the Jewish one in Nazareth).

At times of war, the extent of the media impact is multiplied. The war reaches directly every home. All the Jews are recruited to the army and most Arabs show their alliance to the other side – the adversary. Shocking and horrible images that should never be broadcast in an enlightened society are shown on TV screens. Children are exposed to all of it, without restrictions nor explanations. Parents are most often unaware of their children’s feelings, and therefore do not use “home censorship”. As a result, children watching those images are “flooded” with violent, threatening and anxiety-provoking information, and left alone with raw emotions.

This became prominent during the war on Gaza where the media exposure was completely unrestrained and most of the broadcasted pictures were of dead small children. The public at large, including children, was inundated with images of children, infants and women who were killed by IDF shelling. Some of the children concluded that “Israel is killing children”. In the fantasy world of a child (where the sense of reality, space and time is different from that of an adult, thus allowing him to give different interpretations to events that do not go in line with reality and, at times, even intensify them far beyond), it is understandably possible that the broadcasted anxiety turns into a real and personal one. The horror and fear were transferred from the TV screen directly into their hearts and minds.

3. THE IMPACT OF RELIGION

Try to imagine the conflict taking place in the mind of a child who sees on TV the image of a killed child, of his own age, presented as “shahid” (martyr), together with the sentence “Allah Akbar” (God is great)... He

may very well think that what happened was a good and acceptable thing...

Religion is highly ranked in the Arab world and has great influence among the three religious groups in the Arab world, meaning Christian, Druze, and especially Islam with its majority followers. All channels broadcast the prayers of the “Mua’zzin” (call for prayer) 5 times a day, all year round. Everyone, including little children, is hitched to the special broadcasts during the entire month of Ramadan. There are no less than 30 channels specializing in the Qur’an (Holy Islam Book) and it is no different when it comes to internet sites, radio or the print press.

Religion is taught at school and every village has several mosques. It is an intrinsic part of the Arab child’s environment.

Religion could have been a positive factor if it had been placed into trustworthy hands, with the humane aspect of religion in mind. Faith has indeed always played an important role in coping with distress. The problem starts when religion is used by political groups, and violence is made legitimate “in the name of God”

Christian Arabs also stumble over tedious contrasts on the national level. For instance, Christianity views Judaism as its inspiration, but the Arab Christian finds himself in conflict with Judaism and Jews on the national, daily level...

Islam adopts the major concepts and stories embedded in Judaism and in Christianity’ even exaggeratingly so at times. “David”, for example, is a king in Christianity and Judaism, but in Islam he has been upgraded to the status of a real “Prophet”. On the other hand, the “Magen David”, symbol of the State of Israel, drawn on Israeli tanks and planes, has become a symbol of hostility among the Arabs! At the same time, the Arab child sees the Star of David on the national flag hoisted on top of his school and local authority buildings, on the side of ambulances and on top of hospitals.

So much confusion for the young child’s mind, unseen by the adults surrounding him, who are not even aware of all these intrinsic contradictions...

4. THE IMPACT OF CULTURE

The Western common view about “good enough” parenting is that it is the parents’ task to be sensitive, attentive, and protective to their children at all times. In times of war, their duty is to protect them physically as well as emotionally and to provide them with an atmosphere of safety and calm, in spite of the turmoil outside.

The Arab concept of “good enough” parenting is different, because the valued concepts are authority and collectivity. The individual’s characteristics and needs are much less valued, if ever. Therefore, the community, including the parents, do not consider the child as an individual with specific and sometimes, unique needs and characteristics, but as a “piece” of the community “puzzle”. Since individual psychological needs are not valued, the Arab community does not invest in becoming trained in psychology, and the lack of knowledge, at times outright ignorance, is the rule in most Arab communities. More often than not, no one pays attention nor thinks about what may take place in the child’s mind, in times of peace as well as in times of war. The Arab community is “adult-oriented”, children are not considered as having their specific ways of understanding and behaving, and a young child is supposed to regulate by himself his negative emotions, and not to make his parents feel shameful. A child with behavior problems, is very quickly labeled as a “bad child”, and the idea his/her behaviors may reflect emotional distress and not evilness, is often very foreign to parents. They will most often blame the child, which, in turn, can only make things worse.

5. THE SOCIETAL CONTEXT

Regular daily life in between the war times: The Israeli Arab child and his family, especially those who live in mixed Arab and Jewish cities, breathe the same air, shop at the same shopping malls, visit the same parks and children play with the same games (but not together). At times, there is even a business partnership, meetings at restaurants, visits to the Jewish dentist or to the General Hospital. They depend on the same police and same authorities. Living in a mixed community influences the dressing and behavior codes, house designs and furniture. Israeli Arabs most often

speak Hebrew fluently (most Jews do not speak Arabic), and often insert Hebrew words in their daily talks in Arabic. The fate of the Israeli Arab society is very much dependent on the fate of the Israeli Jewish one, in all domains, for the good and the bad.

The problem lies in the coherence of their identity. What is the inner emotional experience of any Arab boy and his family that accompanies this daily conduct? What do they really feel while at the shopping center? While walking along the main street of a Jewish city? Or when they need an official figure, such as a doctor, a police officer, a clerk at the income tax office or at the national security office?

I believe that the crystallizing identity is extremely ambivalent, with feelings of belonging as well as alienation. The recent Arab-Israeli movie “Adgami” has vividly illustrated this complex dialectic and fragile equilibrium.

Life during war: When the conflict between Israel (where the child lives as a citizen) and its Arab neighbors (his brothers) becomes violent, this fragile equilibrium is disrupted. Not only their internal conflict gets intensified, but their physical safety is endangered. Ironically, in most Arab towns and villages there are no shelters, no warning sirens, and not enough security officials. They face, from their Jewish neighbors, an increased suspiciousness of collaborating with the enemy, and a blaming message from their Palestinian brothers as collaborators with their enemy. This, in addition to the physical threat, can lead only to intense negative emotions and identity confusion. Their loneliness is intensified by their unique in-between position: as opposite to the Palestinian and Jewish populations who are “only” physically threatened, the Israeli Arabs feel threatened in their physical as well as in their emotional integrity.

The children, from their youngest age, experience this reality to a large extent “through the eyes of their parents”. Hence, the child follows suit, becoming confused and his level of internal coherence weakening even to a greater measure than the adults around him.

II. COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE

Collective resilience is the coping mechanism the community activates in times of stress in order to strengthen individuals. It is based on three main components: leadership, shared beliefs system, and societal cohesion. War is a strong factor in stimulating societal cohesion, feelings of national belongings, and gathering around the leaders.

These three factors are problematic among the Arab minority in Israel in times of war: They do not identify with statements made by the official leadership of the country, nor with the Jews’ feeling of increased cohesion in face of the bad enemy. The Jews have a common enemy, but for the Arab-Israelis there is no such shared enemy. They even have difficulty identifying and defining the enemy. They can neither rely on their own leaders, whose leadership is mainly civil, traditional, not duly organized and even tempestuous at times.

Some solve the problem by putting aside their internal conflicts, thus keeping a neutral stance, and worry only about the physical threat, when it becomes close. Others identify with the war and the Israeli State, experience much anger and blame directed at their neighbor “the enemy” and fear physical injury. Others feel identification with the Arab nation, based either on religion or national solidarity, and have an intense desire to see Israel defeated in the war. A fourth group finds itself in a personal dilemma that worsens at the time of war (“the Israeli in me is shooting at the Palestinian in me and vice versa”).

As a result of all these processes, the collective identity weakens, with varying prominence of the components mentioned above, and at times there is conflict between the national, religious and civil components which turns the experience into “a minority within a minority within a minority”. For the child, the situation is totally confusing: on the one hand, the Israeli government distributes gas masks to Arab children and on the other, soldiers demolish their Palestinian relatives’ houses. The army is simultaneously a protective and threatening figure, leaving the child confused and disorganized. Whom is he supposed to love and to go to for protection? This disorganizing experience is shared by the adults

as well, magnifying the children's. No wonder why the children turn to regressive coping mechanisms.

III. THE ROLE OF THERAPISTS IN THE COMPLEX REALITY'

During war, therapists, Jewish and Arab, find themselves in a state of stress and anxiety, as being part of the community. They are faced with physical dangers while trying to get to the clinic, may even have to look for a shelter if there is an alarm, and may not be able to return home in time. The Arab therapist, who most often works in a Jewish clinical setting, is exposed not only to the same physical threats as his or her Jewish colleague, but to being torn between his professional and personal loyalties. They are asked to be able to live in an emotional "split": in the morning, they treat Arabs and Jews alike, while in the evening, they shed off their professional neutralism and their loyalty is shifted back to their own Arabic family and / or society. Therefore, when considering treatment options for the Arab-Israeli child at times of war, we must bring all the above mentioned into account and see their impact on the specific child and parents, as well as on the therapist.

The lack of awareness of the Arab community to the psychological impact of the war on their children, may explain the very low rate of referrals to clinics. Parents do not make the connection between their child's behavior and the surrounding events, especially in times of war. An additional explanation could be that Arab parents are reluctant to open up and show their weaknesses to Israeli-based health settings. Finally, generally speaking, the Israeli government has not yet corrected the discriminative lack of psychological and mental health services provided to Israeli Arabs. Time has come to conduct studies that will show how the above described phenomena impact Israeli Arab young children over time.



President's Perspective *The WAIMH Regional conference in Akko*

This meeting was special indeed: not only, it was, the first Regional meeting in Infant Mental Health in that region of the world, but also it put us right in the main issue: debating about the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on therapists as well as on infants and families, Israeli Jews as well as Israeli Arabs. This took place in a very special place, Akko, one of the only towns in the country where co-living is really on a daily basis, with all its problematic aside with a special mix of cultures.

Above all, this was a high-level meeting in terms of clinical and research presentations, showing how active and inventive the professionals in the field of Infant Mental Health are in Israel, and allowing us to meet extremely dedicated and trained professionals, members of the Israeli Infant Mental Health Affiliate. This meeting, beautifully organized by Miri Keren and Sam Tyano has also allowed the board to meet in Jerusalem, and has facilitated a smooth transition process between the 'old' and the 'new' board of WAIMH.

Antoine Guedeney, WAIMH president



Akko (site for WAIMH Regional Conference in September, 2009) is situated by the Mediterranean sea.