

*The Politics of Inequality*

# | The Psychological and Educational Impact of Violence on Palestinian Children

*Malk Ouj*

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This article explores how structural violence under Israeli occupation affects the psychological development and educational experience of Palestinian children. Drawing on developmental psychology, human rights reports, and trauma studies, this paper argues that chronic exposure to military surveillance, displacement, and fear creates a pervasive environment of emotional distress. It begins by mapping the everyday conditions of structural violence, checkpoints, home raids, and school disruptions, and then traces how these conditions produce psychological trauma, including PTSD, anxiety, and learned helplessness.

The paper demonstrates how trauma directly impairs learning, disrupts classroom engagement, and erodes a child's connection to identity and the future. By framing trauma not as a byproduct of conflict but as an embedded, structural force, the analysis presents the ways in which occupation interrupts childhood, the generational continuity of culture, aspirations, and mental health. Understanding this psychological cost is crucial to any conversation on justice, education, and the future of Palestinian society.

## *Introduction*

In the occupied Palestinian territories, childhood unfolds in a context shaped by military control, instability, and systemic restrictions. For many Palestinian children, life is dominated by checkpoints, constant surveillance, and the persistent threat of violence. These conditions are not temporary or exceptional. Unlike many global conflict zones marked by state collapse or sporadic violence, the Israeli occupation is institutionalized through formal legal, military, and bureaucratic systems. This structural entrenchment makes daily hardship a predictable and enduring aspect of childhood in the occupied territories and embeds political violence into the most intimate aspects of everyday life. These realities are part of a broader political system that reaches into homes, schools, and public spaces, influencing how children grow, learn, and relate to the world around them.

This paper examines how Palestinian children living under Israeli occupation experience chronic emotional distress, such as fear, anxiety, and grief, all stemming from prolonged exposure to structural violence. It argues that this trauma not only disrupts psychological development and impairs learning but also severs children's connection to cultural identity, erodes their sense of belonging, and undermines their ability to envision a meaningful future.

Early childhood represents the formative stage in which emotional resilience begins to develop. When those years are marked by instability and trauma, the impact is not only personal, but collective. Understanding how occupation shapes the inner lives of Palestinian children offers a deeper view into how political violence operates beyond physical force. It reveals the psychological cost of ongoing conflict, and how it shapes the generation that inherits it.

## *Everyday Realities*

Children in the West Bank and Gaza Strip live under a military occupation that structures their daily routines, interrupts their access to education, and exposes them to repeated trauma (Thabet & V Ostanis, 2012). These are not occasional incidents. They are the foundation of their environment. A study of preschoolers in Gaza found that 98 percent had directly heard the sound of shootings, 88 percent had personally witnessed shooting, and 89 percent had seen images of mutilated bodies on television (Thabet & V Ostanis, 2012). This exposure is not limited to passive observation. Many children have lost family members, experienced home raids, or witnessed military operations in their neighborhoods (B'Tselem, 2022). Massad et al. (2011) found that 65 percent of mothers in their study reported that their children showed severely impaired emotional and psychosocial functioning. Their children's health-related quality of life (HRQOL) scores was not only lower than those of children in the United States, but also lower than scores among children with chronic illnesses in other low-income contexts.

What does this mean? It means that violence does not simply interrupt children's lives but rather it defines them. It penetrates the very architecture of daily life, producing a generation for whom instability is the norm. Observing these effects as more severe than those found in other low-income conflict-affected areas shows that what is happening in Palestine is not a generic tragedy of war, but a particular system of political violence.

These conditions interfere with childhood development. Chronic exposure to violence alters how children understand safety, trust, and social connection. It creates a baseline of anxiety and hypervigilance, which disrupts emotional regulation, memory, and attention—core components of both learning and identity formation. Children raised in continuous stress develop

altered neural pathways associated with emotional regulation and attachment (Qouta et al., 2007), making their ability to bond with others or focus in school more fragile.

Access to education is also shaped by the occupation. School attendance is often interrupted by curfews, military operations, or settler harassment. Ramahi (2015) notes that political instability not only disrupts physical access to schools but also alters their internal structure. The imposed curriculum, combined with militarized settings and limited pedagogical freedom, creates an environment that stifles emotional development and critical thought. Many parents choose to withdraw their children from school—especially girls—due to checkpoint risks or fear of harassment. This compounds psychological trauma with educational loss.

## *Trauma and Mental Development*

Psychological trauma in childhood is not limited to sadness or fear. It includes long-term disruptions to memory, emotional regulation, learning, and identity formation. In the case of Palestinian children, the effects of trauma are especially severe because the conditions that produce it are ongoing and unavoidable.

In Gaza, where more than half the population is under the age of 18, studies consistently show high levels of PTSD, anxiety, and behavioral difficulty. Thabet et al. (2014) found that 60.5 percent of children surveyed showed moderate or severe PTSD symptoms. Common reactions included nightmares, hypervigilance, and fear of being alone. These are not isolated emotional events. They represent how fear becomes a child's default mode of being.

This leads to difficult questions. What kind of adult emerges from a childhood of constant anxiety? These are not just psychological hurdles. They alter how a child sees themselves, others, and the world. Massad et al. (2011) showed that emotional distress in preschoolers was linked to

lower scores in both physical and psychosocial health. These children struggled with memory, attention, and impulse control—skills critical for learning.

When trauma impairs a child's capacity to focus or self-regulate, they cannot fully engage with school or with the broader social structures that education connects to. Ultimately, when these psychological injuries are left unacknowledged, they quietly calcify into the adult psyche.

## *Effects on Education and Learning*

For many Palestinian children, school does not provide the emotional refuge or structure it ideally should. Instead, educational spaces often reflect the instability and fear present in the broader environment. Continuous exposure to violence shapes students' emotional states, interferes with concentration, and inhibits cognitive development, these are all factors that are essential for meaningful engagement in learning.

Empirical studies support this link between trauma and academic disruption. Al-Krenawi et al. (2009) found that repeated exposure to political violence in Gaza was associated with significantly lower academic achievement and increased dropout rates. These outcomes highlight how trauma undermines not only mental health but also children's educational trajectories. Beyond psychological stress, schools in the West Bank and Gaza often face infrastructural and resource-related constraints. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate learning materials, intermittent electricity, and damaged buildings are common. In some cases, schools have been used as temporary shelters during military escalations, further disrupting routine and safety. These conditions compromise both the learning process and students' sense of security.

Teachers are also affected. Many have experienced trauma themselves and are tasked with managing both educational responsibilities and the emotional needs of their students

without proper training or support. Children with trauma-related behavioral issues or learning difficulties are often mislabeled as defiant or inattentive, rather than being recognized as needing specialized care—care that is typically unavailable in these settings.

The long-term effects are considerable. Students subjected to prolonged fear and instability often leave school with diminished confidence, underdeveloped academic skills, and unresolved psychological stress. Girls are disproportionately impacted, with many withdrawn from school due to fears surrounding checkpoints or family concerns about safety. These gendered patterns of disengagement further entrench inequality and limit long-term opportunities. In this context, the classroom becomes not a site of growth, but another domain affected by the broader political and structural violence of occupation. Educational deprivation thus becomes one of the most enduring and overlooked consequences of childhood under occupation.

## *Identity and Belonging*

The trauma of occupation does not stop at disrupting mental health or education. It penetrates the core of identity formation, shaping how children understand themselves, their community, and their place in the world. In early childhood and adolescence, identity is formed through relationships, language, routine, and cultural memory. But for Palestinian children living under military occupation, these developmental building blocks are consistently undermined. Home is often unstable, public spaces are surveilled, and educational materials may be censored or disconnected from Palestinian history. As a result, children struggle to form a stable sense of self. Thabet et al. (2014) found that adolescents who experienced trauma reported difficulty with long-term planning, emotional regulation, and attachment to others.

Khamis (2015) also observed that children and adolescents living under siege exhibited emotional detachment and a narrowed view of the future. Many were not simply struggling with emotional pain but had internalized a worldview in which aspirations felt unrealistic. This is not a sign of personal failure but an understandable psychological adaptation to an environment where unpredictability, threat, and restriction are constant.

The erosion of cultural connection further destabilizes identity. When families are displaced or fragmented and traditional narratives are excluded from formal education, children are cut off from their historical and communal roots. This absence can leave young people feeling unanchored. However, amid this fragmentation, some children still find ways to reclaim their voices. The Tamer Institute for Community Education, for example, creates spaces for young people to write, draw, and reflect. These acts of expression allow children to construct personal narratives that defy the silence and restriction imposed upon them. As one student from Jerusalem reflected, “I was merely a student living with hopes, dreams, and personal identity. I always doubted that one day I’d be able to express it” (Tamer Institute, 2020). Her statement captures a fundamental truth about growing up under occupation: voice itself becomes a form of resistance.

Despite the profound emotional and structural challenges they face, many Palestinian youth continue to show forms of resilience that are rarely acknowledged in public discourse. This resilience does not imply recovery or emotional ease. Rather, it reflects an ability to navigate a daily environment shaped by control and unpredictability. Young people continue to attend school when they can. They care for siblings. They participate in cultural and religious life. They assert their identity in subtle, meaningful ways even when doing so carries emotional or physical risk.

These children are not passive recipients of trauma. They grow into individuals who resist the fragmentation imposed on them by asserting connection, memory, and care. Some become educators, artists, or community workers who guide others through the same systems they endured. Others challenge the occupation directly through documentation, scholarship, or organizing. In each case, they resist not only the occupation of land, but also the occupation of mind and narrative. They challenge the systems that tell them who they cannot be, and in doing so, affirm a future rooted in dignity, memory, and shared struggle.

## *Conclusion*

The psychological impact of the Israeli occupation on Palestinian children cannot be understood in isolation from the broader structures that produce it. This paper has shown that trauma is not a byproduct of war or conflict alone. In the Palestinian context, it is embedded in daily life—shaped by checkpoints, military incursions, home demolitions, disrupted schooling, and the erosion of cultural identity.

These experiences do not simply create moments of distress. They shape how children think, feel, learn, and imagine. The effects are long-term and cumulative. Emotional regulation, cognitive development, and self-perception are all compromised when a child grows up in an environment that offers neither safety nor continuity. For many, education is not a stable path forward but another space shaped by instability. Identity is formed not through exploration and freedom, but through interruption, censorship, and inherited grief.

Yet despite these conditions, Palestinian children and youth continue to assert themselves—through persistence in school, participation in community life, creative expression, and care for others. These acts should not be romanticized, but they must be recognized. They

reflect not only resilience, but a refusal to surrender meaning, memory, and hope in the face of structural violence.

Understanding trauma in this context requires acknowledging that healing cannot occur without justice. No intervention in mental health, education, or development can succeed while the underlying system of occupation remains intact. If children are to grow into adults with the psychological resources to contribute to their communities, they must first be granted the right to live without fear, restriction, or erasure.

The future of Palestinian society depends not only on material reconstruction but on the restoration of emotional and psychological foundations. That work begins by listening to those who have grown up carrying more than their share of silence, and by recognizing that the right to belong, to learn, and to imagine should never be conditional.

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