Bedouin Children and Their Reality Perceptions of the War Between Israel and Gaza

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Bedouin Children and Their Reality Perceptions of the War Between Israel and Gaza

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Abstract

In the military conflict between Israel and Gaza, the Bedouins in Israel find themselves under attack by rockets launched from Gaza, and at the same time identifying with family members in Gaza who suffer casualties as a result of Israel’s operations. Bedouin children experience a threat to their safety, and are required to enter protected spaces when the siren sounds. Simultaneously, they are exposed to the Arab media, which one-sidedly views Israel as the aggressor. This study examines this complex situation from the perspective of Bedouin children aged 8–10, using children’s drawings and letters, interviews, and conversations with their mothers. The findings reflect the children’s complicated impression of the world, manifested in identification with the residents of Gaza and their suffering, anxiety concerning their own safety, and development of post-traumatic stress disorder. They have difficulty constructing a coherent picture of the world, and develop perceptions containing distortions of reality with regard to aggressor and victim. The findings indicate the need for professional intervention which, in addition to building a psychological assistance system, would provide parents with guidance to help them mediate the complex reality for their children in a structured and informed way, and hence enable them to better contend with it.

Introduction

The Bedouins in Israel are a Muslim-Arab minority, and prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, they were virtually the sole inhabitants of the Negev Desert. Bedouin society leads a traditional lifestyle, and since the Ottoman period it has been embroiled in an ongoing struggle with the authorities to preserve that way of life and protect its lands. Following the establishment of the State of Israel, a large number of Negev Bedouins were uprooted from their historical lands and territories, and were left without any tribal territory. Some left Israel and moved to Palestinian population centers around Hebron, in Jordan, and Gaza.¹

Over the last 30 years, several parallel processes have taken place in the Bedouin society in the Negev: (1) radicalization and extremism toward Israel, associated, in particular, with the Bedouins’ demand for official recognition of their ownership of the lands in the unrecognized rural villages; (2) “Palestinization”; an increasing emotional connection with the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza; (3) “Islamization”: a process of return to Islamic roots that was started by external factors in the 1970s, which led to the intensification of the Bedouin community’s identification with Islam; and (4) modernization of the Bedouin population’s way of life, influenced by urbanization, with the modernization of the Bedouin town of Rahat being particularly notable.² Thus, by religious persuasion the Bedouins are Muslims, culturally they are Arabs, from a national standpoint they
are Palestinians, and they are citizens of the State of Israel. This is a complex identity containing contradictions and incongruities.

The complexity of the Bedouin identity is especially salient in light of the ongoing violent conflict between Israel and Palestinian organizations in Gaza. In recent years, Bedouins in Israel’s Negev Desert have found themselves under attack by rockets launched from Gaza by Hamas, while at the same time identifying with family members in Gaza who suffer casualties and destruction as a result of Israel’s military operations.

Bedouin children, who account for more than half the population of the Bedouin localities in the Negev, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the conflict, both in terms of their physical and emotional well-being, and in terms of their ability to incorporate the complexities of their surroundings into a solid identity and unified worldview. The present study attempts to examine the chaotic reality in which Bedouin children in Israel live, the sociopolitical life perceptions constructed in their family environments, and the difficulties of creating a coherent picture of the world and reconciling it with their experience of threat and fear.

Shaping of Children’s Attitudes Towards War and Effects of War on Children’s Well-Being

The threat of war is currently at the forefront of the concerns and fears of children throughout the world. Children’s early emotional attitudes towards war and other social issues are shaped primarily by identification with the attitudes of their parents, in addition to the knowledge and beliefs they encounter at school and in the media. Children absorb these attitudes not necessarily as a result of direct instruction but rather by listening to parents’ conversations, asking questions about political topics, listening to stories and songs about national history, or by attending the victory or commemoration ceremonies of either political leaders or the fallen.

Long-term studies indicate the importance of the sociopolitical perceptions of children of elementary school age, showing that these attitudes and beliefs persist over time and become stronger in adolescence and adulthood. Children can learn to hate war and at the same time develop positive attitudes toward their nation’s struggle, and see themselves as active participants in the war on the side with which they identify.

Children exposed to war, political violence, and terrorism suffer complex bio-psychological behavioral disruptions that are liable to cause significant changes in cognitive, emotional, moral, behavioral, and psychological functioning. Indeed, exposure to security threats has been associated with a broad variety of distress-related symptoms, including fears, depression, social isolation, aggression in interpersonal relationships, and deterioration in scholastic performance. Ongoing exposure to such threats (and the suffering associated with such exposure) interferes with children’s normal development and has been associated with negative long-term pathogenic effects.

Children in prolonged emergency situations need credible information provided by a figure of authority in order to “make sense” of the myriad chaotic impressions they receive. In an environment of violent conflict, parents’ reactions influence not only how children cope with fear, but also the extent to which children—particularly young children—actually experience fear. Clearly, for a family under the pressure of occupation and political violence, it is difficult to provide children with a sense of security and stability. In some cases, the inability of parents to protect their children arouses in the latter
harsh feelings, thoughts, anxiety, fear, hopelessness, helplessness, guilt, confusion, anger, hostility, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In situations of war and political violence, parents’ inability to provide a sufficiently supportive emotional environment for their children may be further exacerbated by material deficits, i.e., prolonged reduction of the family’s economic growth. This situation also has a direct effect on the family’s functioning, including parental ability to provide conditions conducive to raising children.\(^{10}\)

The Study

Study Context: Bedouin Children in a State of Political Conflict

Within the Israeli Bedouins’ milieu of unresolved conflicts, including national alienation and residual anger over social injustices,\(^{11}\) parents are likely to find it difficult to mediate a logical interpretation of reality for their children. The adults’ complex identities are reflected in the children as a broken mirror image with no possibility of coalescing into a coherent reality. Since a coherent reality is one of the prerequisites for building psychological resilience to cope with the distress attending events of war,\(^ {12}\) we propose that Bedouin children’s emotional and cognitive ability to contend with these situations is impaired.

In particular, in Bedouin society, the extended family plays a significant role in providing instrumental, emotional, cognitive, and social support to its members in times of hardship and crisis. This support can strengthen the nuclear family and help it cope with the negative implications of political violence. Yet, in times of war, the strong familial ties between family members create a tragic partnership between the Negev Bedouins and their relatives in Gaza. Thus, the Bedouins find themselves in a chaotic reality wherein parents identify with the residents of Gaza, yet at the same time protect their children from rockets being launched from there—a reality in which parents are likely to find it difficult to explain to their children which is the “good” side and which is the “bad”.

Since there is a strong correlation between the parents’ understanding, their interpretation of events, and the reflection of this understanding in their children, it becomes immensely difficult for parents, and, more generally, for the educational system, to organize reality in a way that it will be both consistent and clear.

How, then, do Bedouin children react to the reality that surrounds or pervades them? What are the manifestations of distress that surface in them, and how can they be helped to cope with it? These questions constitute the basis for the present study.

Data Collection

The material for the study was collected during two periods of conflict, in January 2009 (Operation Cast Lead) and in August–September 2014 (Operation Protective Edge). During these periods, organizations in the Palestinian territories fired rockets at Israel, and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) retaliated with air and ground fire.

We collected three data sets. The first data set comprises 35 drawings made by pupils (aged 8–10) in a Bedouin town in the Negev, collected by their Bedouin teachers in January 2009. The children created the drawings during a lesson in the elementary school they attended. In the days preceding the lesson, rockets had been launched from Gaza into Israel, with some aimed at the children’s locality. The teacher tried to dis-
sipate the tension by instructing the children to express their feelings about the war in free drawings.

The second and third data sets comprise, respectively, 12 interviews with Bedouin children (aged 8–10) and the minutes of a focus group with six mothers, conducted by Bedouin counselors in August–September 2014. The parents of the interviewed children consented to having the interviews recorded and conveyed to the researcher without identifying details.

The language used to communicate with the children was Arabic. In presenting the data herein, confidentiality of the children’s details has been strictly maintained.

**Description of the Children’s Drawings**

The objects shown in the drawings can be divided into four groups: (1) Objects directly connected to the war (rockets, bombs, rifles, and especially tanks and soldiers); (2) human civilian figures (primarily babies, children, women); (3) symbolic objects (the Israeli and Palestinian flags); and (4) objects that are typically prevalent in children’s drawings (a house, a tree, flowers, sun, clouds). See Table 1.

A first look reveals the extensive representation of war objects, which appear in two-thirds of the drawings; half of these drawings prominently feature the Israeli tank (usually with an Israeli flag on it or coming from it). One-quarter of the drawings show Israeli soldiers either firing or attacking. Human figures (those that are not soldiers) appear only in half of the drawings, and are mainly women and children, with hardly any representations of civilian men. The most prevalent objects in drawings by children of this age, such as sun, clouds, flowers, trees, and houses, appear at a lower-than-expected incidence, and they are usually accompanied by emotional expressions, for example, a weeping sun, clouds shedding raindrops (even though the sun is shining), and broken flowers. The symbolic objects of the Palestinian and Israeli flags appear in many of the drawings, and in the ones in which these objects do not appear, the deliberate use of Palestinian flag colors is pronounced.

The following is a brief description and analysis of the drawn objects in each group. In analyzing the drawings, we also focus on the sizes of the various images. Large, frightening objects occupy more space on the paper and are more pronounced.13

**A Direct, Symbolic, Descriptive Depiction of the War**

The image featured most frequently in the children’s drawings is the tank, which is large and menacing (see, e.g., Figure 1). Some of the tanks are drawn in straight lines using a ruler, and others are drawn freehand. Most of the tanks are shown firing missiles or shells

<table>
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<td></td>
<td>Sun, flowers, trees, clouds</td>
<td>9</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1. The occurrence of objects in the drawings by category.
at a house or at people. Tanks that are drawn alongside houses are generally larger than the houses, even when the houses are multistoried. The human figures at which the tank is aiming are drawn in varying sizes: most of them are small, even tiny, and some are lying wounded or dead. The barrel of the tank’s cannon is generally large and long, and reaches the object at which it is firing. Aircraft appear less frequently than tanks, and are usually small. The aircraft are drawn naïvely, resembling the innocent airplanes seen in children’s books, yet the rockets they are firing and the bombs they are dropping are clearly visible (see, e.g., Figure 1). The aircraft are not close to the other drawn objects, and it seems that their strikes are less direct and threatening (it should be borne in mind that Bedouin children in Israel came under threat of rockets, not aerial bombardment).

Drawings of tanks, aircraft, rockets, and other weaponry can express children’s reactions to the need to cope with military threat by building a counter force. In the Bedouin children’s drawings, however, it seems that the drawings actually depict the weakness they feel vis-à-vis the objects representative of war.

The figures of soldiers in the drawings resemble figures drawn by children in the first half of elementary school: they are schematic, often missing one body part or another (two-dimensional legs, arms, or items of clothing). Some of the soldiers are marked as Israeli by a Star of David on their clothes. They wear army headgear, and some are holding a rifle or hand grenade, and, like the tanks, they are firing at people.

Civilian Figures

The figures look vulnerable and helpless. Many are drawn with tears and a downturned mouth (in contrast to the Israeli soldiers, who are drawn with smiling mouths). There are numerous drawings of small figures beside which the words “children” or “babies” are written. Some of the figures are lying down with a red stain symbolizing blood beside them. Most of the adult figures are mothers. All the mothers are wearing Western clothing, and there is not one drawing containing a traditional Bedouin allusion or character-
istic. The drawing of the figures is consistent with that of children’s drawings all over the world (Figure 2).

One drawing shows another aspect of the general helplessness of the adult world—a doctor who is unable to save a baby (Figure 3).

One distinctive picture is a collage composed of Israeli press photographs, and beside them the child’s drawing and interpretation. The collage comprises two pictures: on half the sheet is a photograph of a classroom in Beersheba with a gaping hole in the ceiling, caused by a Grad rocket. Beside it is the newspaper headline in big Hebrew letters: “The Shelled Classroom”, and on the upper right side is a picture of Israeli soldiers. In the collage the Bedouin child draws a big tank, and beside it he writes: “A rocket fell on the school. The Israelis are causing danger for the pupils.”

This drawing clearly demonstrates the chaotic world in which the children try to build a logical continuum that will explain what is happening. The children’s logic works in direct, coherent connections: “In Gaza they’re killing children and they’ll kill us as well because we’re children.”

Sun, Clouds, a House, and Flowers

These objects, the most common elements of children’s drawings, appear in most of the drawings, but their characteristics differ from those of typical representations of these objects: the sun is weeping, not laughing, the clouds are dull (dullness in drawing is an indicator of anxiety), the flowers are broken or torn out of the soil, and the houses appear to be on the verge of collapse. With the exception of one optimistic drawing of peace and hope, all the drawings seem to present an emotional experience of fear, sadness, helplessness, and a disintegration of the naive fabric of expressions of joy.

Expressing Emotions in Writing

Almost all the children’s drawings (30 of the 35 drawings) include a written description. In some, the writing covers the entire sheet of the drawing (some drawings, for example,
contain letters to the leadership of Hamas or Israel); many of these drawings are presented under the title “Gaza under Fire”. In other cases, descriptive subheadings appear next to the drawings: “A house, a rocket, no casualties”, or “Houses, a rocket, an airplane”. Drawings of collapsing houses or bleeding figures lying on the ground are accompanied by explanations, e.g., “A destroyed house, a dead man, and there’s a lot of blood on him.”

Fear

In 17 drawings (49%) the word “fear” appears directly. In two other drawings, fear is expressed in writing, although the word is not explicitly used (“I don’t want to die …”). The children’s fear is direct and unmediated, suggesting that they feel unprotected from the terror of death, which they presumably see on the TV screen in broadcasts from Gaza: “I don’t want to die like the families in Gaza.”

Sleep Problems

Fear can be physically manifested in sleep problems. The children describe having difficulty falling asleep, crying, and wanting an adult’s protection beside them (parents, brothers, an aunt): “I’m scared of the war. Mommy, Daddy, help me, I can’t sleep”; “I was scared at night and cried in the middle of the night, and I ran to my aunt to sleep with her”; “I was scared. I went to sleep with my big brother, I’d wait for him to come at night.”

In some cases the fear is projected onto others, and is expressed through a younger sister or by means of a dialogue, e.g., between a drawn mother figure and a little girl: Mother: “I’m afraid for my children.” Girl: “I’m so scared of the war. I can’t sleep.”

In one case talking figures are drawn, with one telling the other that she is frightened, and the other: “Me too”.

Figure 3. “A doctor wants to save a baby.”
A Tangible Threat

The children express general fear of the war, and more tangibly of the rockets as its representation (see, e.g., Figure 4): “I’m scared and worried that the rockets will reach Rahat”; “I’m scared that the rockets will fall on the house and my beautiful land”; “I’m really scared that a rocket will fall on our house. I’m scared when I’m asleep.” The children associate incoming rocket attacks with the Israeli sirens warning of these attacks; this association is expressed in a fear of going to sleep: “I was afraid of going to sleep because of the siren, because I was afraid the rocket would destroy our house.” Descriptions of the terror of the war are tangible and concrete. The fear has a clear address: “I’m scared that the [Israeli] army will attack us”; “I ask God to protect us from the rockets and the Jews”; “I’m scared that the army will come and destroy our house.” The children are unable to create a “separation zone” between the children of Gaza and themselves: “I’m scared that the army will come to Rahat and kill children like they killed children in Gaza”, or “What have the Bedouin children done to anyone that you’re firing at sleeping children?”

Identification

Identification with the inhabitants of Gaza is absolute: “Gaza is burning, Gaza is in danger, the people are our people and the blood is our blood. Gaza our sister and our blood.” The shaheeds (martyrs), the Bedouins, and the children, become a single group under attack: “What have the shaheeds done, what have the Bedouins done, and you’re firing on the sleeping children, and stop the war.” The perception of Israel as the enemy, as evil, is absolute, and there is no qualification that might appear by means of complex or abstract thinking at a later age: “The enemy is Israel. Peace in Palestine. The enemy has killed. They killed the people, the father, and he was young.”
The enemy is identified with Israel, a perception reflected, for example, in one drawing of an Israeli flag and a Palestinian flag, in which the word “Peace” appears above the Palestinian flag, and the word “Enemy” appears over the Israeli flag. Some drawings indirectly suggest identification with the inhabitants of Gaza; in these drawings, Israel, which is identified with the war, does not appear by name: “I love Palestine and don’t like war.” One child sums up the situation with what seems to him to be a factual description: “Israel wants Gaza’s land and when I saw this situation I felt sad for Gaza and the children, and there were 954 dead and 200 wounded, and there are no medicines.” The children’s logic works in direct, coherent connections: “In Gaza they’re killing children and they’ll kill us as well because we’re children.”

From Helplessness to Action

Some of the children view their role as mediators between Israel and the casualties in Gaza, a role that might give a configuration of competence to the sense of helplessness in the face of threat and fear. In a letter to the Israeli leadership, one of the children writes:

I’m asking you to help Gaza and the families in Gaza, help them with food, medicines, water, flour, sugar and salt. Make an effort for Gaza, and the children who have lost their mother and father and those who have lost the children. I want to bring clothes and shoes to the children and women and the men. We are all brothers.

Another child tries to explain the situation to the Israeli leadership: “The little children are dying and the old people and the men and women. Stop the war in Gaza.” One child writes directly to the Israeli leadership by name:

A letter to the leaders of Israel, Olmert, Barak, and Livni [Israel’s Prime Minister, Defense Minister and Foreign Minister at the time, respectively]—how are the children and mothers to blame, how are the old people to blame, God will punish you. You’re shooting at sleeping children and stop the war and thank you.

In a letter to the Hamas leadership, one child writes: “We have written a letter to Israel to stop the war against the children and the mothers and the old people and the houses.”

Hope

Is there hope in these situations? The children want to end the war and live in peace: “I dream that there’s peace between Israel and Gaza”, writes one of the girls. But in their opinion this situation is contingent upon the unilateral cessation of Israel’s hostile actions: “And I pray that the war will end because people are dying in Gaza and they’re innocent.” In a letter to Israel’s leaders, one of the children writes: “I want peace between Israel and Gaza because I’m afraid for the Arabs of Gaza. Don’t send rockets.”

Of all the drawings there is only one that is optimistic. It is naïve, innocent, the only one with colorful flowers that are not withered or drooping, and its title is: “A state of peace in which there is no war”.

Interviews with the Children

We analyzed interviews with 12 children, which took place during Operation Protective Edge in September 2014. These interviews were conducted almost six years after collection of the drawings discussed above (January 2009). Yet analysis of the interviews, as
presented below, indicates considerable similarity between the perceptions of the interviewed children and those of the children who created the drawings. This similarity may reflect consolidation of the sociopolitical worldview of the Bedouin children living in Israel’s Negev Desert. The interviews were semi-open and focused on four main questions: What do the children know about the war; what are their attitudes toward it (or in their language, “Who are the good guys and who are the bad guys?”); what are they afraid of; and what do they hope for?

All the children describe the war as being waged between Gaza and Israel. They are unaware of the existence of either a civil or military government in Gaza, and for them Gaza is a state equivalent in governance to, but weaker than, Israel. The land struggle in which the Bedouins in Israel are embroiled is diverted to the military conflict: “They fought because Gaza wanted its lands that Israel took from the Gazans. Now Israel doesn’t want to and won’t give them their lands.” The confusion and inability to distinguish between the causes of the conflict are substantial; children’s responses contain random knowledge on disagreements in the Jewish-Arab conflict: “The people in Gaza want the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem that belongs to them. The Gazans want this mosque because God took our Prophet Muhammad on a trip from Al-Aqsa to another mosque very, very far away;

The Jews want to build mosques near this mosque in Jerusalem, and the Gazans want to build a mosque there too, that’s why there’s a war … The people of Gaza also want Jerusalem and the Jews want Jerusalem as well.15

The religious argument constitutes part of the children’s organization of the world, and they ostensibly use it to arrange and organize a clearer and more understandable world for themselves. Religion as a distinguishing criterion between the “good” and the “bad” leaves the children totally confused:

The Gazans are good because the Jews don’t pray, only a small part of them prays, the Jews that make war don’t pray. The Jews are bad, the part that prays is the one that’s good. The ones that don’t pray are the ones who are bad.

The children draw their attitudes and worldviews from social, cultural, and familial narratives:

The Jews are bad and [the people] in Gaza are sad. They’ve got no food, they’ve got no life. They pray to God for victory and peace, and the Jews are bad and criminals, and they’re the reason for all the evil. In the Islamic world nobody likes them and I don’t like them either … They killed my grandfather’s father.

Information on the conflict generally comes from home:

I watch Al-Jazeera on TV with my father and grandfather and uncles. There they say that Israel is criminal, killing children and mothers, and destroying houses in Gaza. My father says that there is a great and merciful God, but my grandfather says that our day will come when they’ll kill us too, it’s just a matter of time.

In all the interviews only one fourth-grade girl expressed empathy towards the Jewish side:

The war is a conflict between Gaza and Israel and each one is fighting for their survival and their right to live. In the war both sides are fighting for the same thing, and each side thinks it has a right to it until it gets it, or until they reach agreement.
The same girl mentions that her source of information for developing her worldview is the school: “There are no bad people, that’s what we learned, there are people fighting for the same objective, and that’s their right and there’s no bad side and good side here” (emphasis added).

Terms such as “state”, “army”, and “terrorist organizations”, which children are likely to encounter in the media and in discussions of the conflict, are abstract, and the children have difficulty understanding them, and consequently some of them place the blame concretely on the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. In their perception, the war is between Gaza and Israel, between Hamas and Netanyahu. Whereas in the children’s drawings from the previous war, the blame was leveled at the then-Prime-Minister Ehud Olmert, in the present war it is leveled at the present prime minister: “Netanyahu is always throwing rockets on children in Gaza.”

Although the children have clear, dichotomous perceptions of which side in the war is right, their statements suggest that, in reality, “them” and “us” intermingle: “Israel is the bad side, our state is doing bad things in Gaza.” Another girl states: “I feel anger and sadness about what is happening between our state and the Palestinians in Gaza, who are Arabs and like our brothers.” Evident here is a situation of identification with the inhabitants of Gaza from within the Israeli identity, without the children consciously experiencing its immanent paradox. This confusion of identities also appears when the children refer directly to the threat of rockets: “I want Gaza to stop firing at Israel so that their children will live in peace and quiet without fear and so they don’t die.”

The children describe the situation in Gaza as a catastrophe:

A lot were wounded and died in Gaza because of the war, and we’ve got to help them [the residents of Gaza] by sending in food, water, and medicines. On the news I see dead little children and parents crying over their children, and whole families died, and I see children who want to live a quiet and peaceful life, and I’m very angry.

Identification with the children of Gaza heightens fear for personal safety. “Israel fired more rockets at Gaza and murdered all the children in Gaza”; “What scares me most of all is hearing the siren, I’m frightened by its sound and feel that something will fall on me or my family like I once saw in Gaza on TV.” Faced with the scenes of destruction and harm to the population, the children are unable to use the cognitive tools at their disposal to explain what is happening: “In the war almost 150 people die every day and there are hundreds of wounded, and it doesn’t make sense.” The children’s logic is simple and draws a direct connection between what is happening to the children of Gaza and what might happen to them: “They’re killing children in Gaza so they’ll kill us too because we’re children.”

Children’s accounts suggest that their parents’ attempts to calm them sometimes evoke distrust:

I’m scared that the rocket will fall on our house, and I hear the siren and the “boom” and it fell a lot in Beersheba and we’re not far from there, my mother always says that it won’t reach us but will only fall beside the village, but she only says that to calm us.

When an authoritative grandfather explains to his grandson that they will stay in their house and not become like the refugees in Gaza, the grandson perceives the context of the explanation as a threat associated with death: “Grandfather says that we won’t
move, that we’ll die here, so I’m scared. I want to live in peace and quiet and not hear the war. I don’t want to die like the children in Gaza.”

How the children react to the sirens warning of incoming rocket attacks from Gaza is similar to how children anywhere react to a threat: “When I’m scared I run to my mother and hug her tight”; “I’m scared of the siren and we haven’t got a shelter at home. When there’s a siren we all stand under the stairs”; “I was scared of the rockets. But when I hid in the shelter or went into the stairwell, I put my hands over my head and then I wasn’t scared.”

Some children describe the process of adapting to the threat of war as if it is possible to get used to it or deny and repress the fear:

I was only scared on the first day of the war from the sound of the siren and the rockets. Afterwards it became a normal thing and I stopped being scared because I’d gotten used to the sound, I was only scared and frightened on the first day;

“I didn’t feel anything. I’d only got a bit scared when the ‘boom’ was close by”; “I’d forget and try not to remember that there’s a war.”

Expressions of hope belong to a perception of the future and the ability to enlist optimism and belief that the bad situation will improve. In the interviews, we found a considerable difference between the 8-year-olds and the slightly older 10-year-olds. The younger children relate to the present: “I want my parents not to die and for us not to leave where we live”; “I want there to be peace and quiet, and for the schools to open on time.” The slightly older children express distant wishes that emphasize the shift from a state of helplessness to control and power:

My hope in life is to be a heart doctor in the future and give anyone who feels under stress or is crying, medicine for his heart so he feels better … And in the present I hope for peace and want to stop the wars in the world, and live together as friends.

Or a broader, more universal wish: “I dream every day that there will be peace between all the nations” (see, e.g., Figure 5).
Yet, together with the attempt to express optimism and hope, we can already find, at this early age, expressions of determinism and skepticism, as in the case of the eight-year-old boy who sums up: “Nobody knows his fate and the future.”

**Mothers in the War**

The crucial role of mothers in situations of military conflict with Israel has recently been extensively researched by Roth and Duaibis, who describe Palestinian mothers in East Jerusalem and the West Bank in a traumatic vortex of living in a state of daily threat, and having to make substantial efforts to contain the family’s suffering and their own fears, not only of losing their children but also of losing their own sanity. On the face of it, the Bedouin mothers’ situation is far better than that of their West Bank counterparts who live under occupation, but they also have to contend with emotional and psychological aspects associated with identity, which is described metaphorically by one of the mothers: “Your heart is torn” [Hind].

Conversations with the Bedouin mothers, which were held only a few days after the ceasefire came into effect, reveal inner conflicts between their identity (Bedouin-Israeli-Palestinian) and almost total identification with the residents of Gaza.

My family on my mother’s side is in Gaza. We heard on the news what happened there and we called and they said that their house had been destroyed. Our only contact with them is by mobile phone. We only spoke to them briefly and asked who was alive and who was dead. We told the children that there was nothing to be done and that it was their fate. The children are angry with Israel. Israel closed Gaza from four directions. How do you expect anyone to live when you close them off? So they attack. There’s no milk, no medicines. So it’s reasonable that they dig tunnels because they want to cross into the world outside Gaza. [Abir]

…I try to be objective, but I’m inclined toward the Arab side. They’re my family. [Zuhara]

An example of the difficult conflict between the mothers’ various roles as Palestinians who, on the one hand, object to being given orders by the Israeli army, and feel loyalty to the authority of the men of the family on the other, can be seen in the following description:

Just as we broke the [Ramadan] fast the siren sounded. The children left their food and asked what they should do. The men stayed at the table and didn’t get up and go to the protected space. I had to feign indifference and continue serving the food. [Mazal]

The feeling that their ability to protect their children, mainly on the psychological level, is impaired can be heard clearly in the mothers’ words. In the absence of ability to build mental resilience for coping with the war and its events, the mothers’ main endeavor is directed to the physical sphere of calming the children when the siren sounds, dealing with their night-time fears, and attempting to contend with symptoms of trauma, such as resumed bed-wetting, restlessness, difficulty with separation and independence, and fright from spontaneous noises around the house.

We mothers don’t know how to behave. I was working away from home all the time [during the war]. They were on their own. When the siren sounds, right
away I call them from work [she uses the present tense]. In the afternoon they
tell me how it was, but when the siren sounded I was helpless. [Abir]
My son sleeps with me in my bed all the time, even though the protected space is
close to his room. He asks me, “Why will the rocket come to me?” I told him it’s
far away and it’s not here and it’s far away. [Zuhara]
I comfort him, that it [the situation] will be fine. We haven’t got a protected
space. Sometimes at night when the siren sounds I carry him out of bed to
the stairs where there’s a wall. [Mazal]
The little one, four years old, was the most scared. He’d say all the time
“Mother, there are rockets now”, even when there weren’t. He’d run around
all day saying “There’s a rocket now.” [Fatma]
I’m stressed because there was a big boom close to the house. I was at my
mother’s with two children. I went crazy. I was stressed out. Even as an adult
you want to cry. But you can’t with the children there. [Zuhara]

The mothers describe how the war disrupted the children’s routine. They were unable to
leave the house or to go to the nearby city, and the leisure activities planned for the chil-
dren during the summer vacation were canceled. Likewise, the children’s normal behav-
ioral patterns were disrupted, replaced with post-traumatic symptoms. “My son’s twelve,
and he’s angry all the time. In the last war he’d go out of his way to clash with me over any
little thing” [Abir]; “My son’s more aggressive” [Zuhara]; “The little one is nine, and he
gave me a lot of trouble. He started sleeping in my bed” [Fatma]; “When my son is
stressed he gets short of breath. It’s hard for him to breathe and he starts coughing,
and then I wasn’t able to sleep at night and I gave him inhalation” [Rim]. One of the
mothers said that her daughter was still experiencing fears from the previous conflict
three years earlier: “She was on her own, asleep, and heard the siren. She ran to my
parents, four or five minutes away. She’s been scared ever since. She’s scared and cries
and feels stressed” [Hand].

The mothers indicate that, as a result of their identification with the residents of Gaza
and their anger toward Israel, they did not regard the personal safety guidelines distrib-
uted by the IDF Home Front Command as credible instructions that should be followed.
Additionally, the mothers did not watch programs broadcast on Israeli TV, in which pro-
fessionals provided guidance for parents in war situations. At the same time, the mothers
state that their children received extensive exposure to the Gaza television channel; this
exposure is explained, \textit{inter alia}, by the fact that the young children do not understand
Hebrew, so the Israeli channels are irrelevant for them. Only one mother talked about
making a connection between unsupervised TV viewing and the children’s sleep pro-
lems: “The children watch a lot of television. I warn them about not watching newscasts
because then they won’t sleep. It shocks them” [Reem]. Consequently, while non-select-
ive scenes of the war were a constant presence in the home, Bedouin parents, unlike the
Israeli-Jewish population, did not receive self-defense instructions and guidance, and
thus were not able to benefit from a heightened sense of being able to effectively cope
with the situation.

Indeed, the mothers complain about the lack of coping mechanisms at their disposal,
directing their complaints primarily toward the municipal authorities, which, in their
opinion, should have helped them and their children during the war. Some of the
mothers’ anger and frustration in the face of the difficult situation they experienced is
directed at the Israeli government, and the public and administrative office holders in
their locality. They express a sense of discrimination, comparing their own situations
with those of neighboring Jewish localities, in which communities organized to keep children occupied in protected community centers, and took them on trips outside the danger zone.

Several of the mothers express a sense of lacking “... guidance and explanations about how to behave with the children, how to talk to them” [Abir]. Instead, they transferred the responsibility for addressing the situation to the education system: “I trust the school because I might say something wrong” [Mazal]. The school itself is perceived as possessing the professional knowledge and authority for dealing with children in the emotional sphere: “In school on the first day after the war, they asked them questions and talked to them.” The school initiated contact with the families during the war, with teachers calling pupils’ homes and offering assistance in referring children with problems for therapy. The mothers, who were afraid of letting the children out of the house, viewed the offer as irrelevant. Most of the mothers were aware of the existence of the Hosen Center for Children at Risk (located in Rahat), where psychologists were available to treat stress and trauma, but they did not avail themselves of this service. They perceived the Hosen Center as a last resort: “I was in control of the situation, but if it got worse I’d have taken him to the psychologist” [Hind].

The fathers’ psychological role in the family is unclear. It seems that, in some cases, adherence to the traditional division of the breadwinner father and the child-raising mother continued even when the reality changed. Most of the men did not work during the war because their employment was stopped, and they were at home when the sirens sounded, but did not take an active part in protecting the children at those times. That is, despite the new reality brought about by the war, preference of the male professional identity over the child-care identity, which is considered female, was taken for granted: “My husband markets vegetables and he was sitting at home for three weeks. We felt it financially and depended on my salary. But the worst thing was that the children were alone at home” [Abir]. “My husband is the vice-principal at the school. He couldn’t help because he had to be at school, even when it was vacation time and there was no work there.”

Despite the numerous difficulties, the pessimism, the frustration, and the anger, the mothers—like the children—search for hope by finding a common denominator that crosses nationalities and political conflicts: “I believe that in the end there will be peace, because at the end of the day we are all mothers on both sides.”

Discussion

Sagi and Antonovsky describe the individual’s need to promote experiences that help him or her to see the world as “logical” from cognitive, instrumental, and emotional standpoints. A sense of coherence acts mainly as a “shock absorber”, and is linked to mental and physical well-being. For the individual to develop a sense of coherence, the stimulations he or she receives from the environment must be received as information, not as noise, and be comprehensible along an expected and organized continuum. A strong sense of coherence enables the individual to withstand pressure and still feel optimism, resilience, self-efficacy, and develop a sense of competence to solve problems.

The findings of the study described in this article indicate that the Bedouin children in the Negev, caught in the middle of a protracted violent conflict between Israel and Palestinian organizations, lack such coherence. The children’s drawings and statements indicate that they identify primarily with the children in Gaza, just as the adults in their families identify with their relatives in Gaza; yet, unlike the adults, children lack the cog-
nitive tools to contend with the inconsistency between this identification and the simultaneous need to defend themselves against the rockets launched from Gaza. Israel is both the “victimizer” and the source of physical protection from the rockets. Likewise, the military wing of Hamas—which, in the Bedouins’ view, represents the legitimate perceptions of the residents of Gaza—is also the aggressor firing at them. In this chaotic mélange the children’s logical, coherent perceptions are shattered, and with them the ability to develop moral thinking, to distinguish between “us” and “them”, to map who is “good” and who is “bad” in the world, and especially to locate themselves in a safe, protected place of belonging and identity. The confusion is exacerbated by television broadcasts of scenes of death and destruction in Gaza, to which the children are continuously exposed, which eliminate the sense of physical distance from these images and disrupt the children’s orientation in physical, geographical space. Accordingly, the children’s drawings and statements reflect a sense of belonging to the weak, harmed, attacked, and helpless side, and a lack of a sense of adult protection.

The children’s drawings and statements suggest that, as noted in prior research, children define war primarily on the basis of its concrete aspects, such as the threat it poses to one’s home, to one’s security and to the integrity of the family. Although they are not able to understand the complex details of the situation, the children are able to absorb feelings and fears. The fear is real and tangible, and is connected with a natural existential fear that offers protection from danger. However, the children’s expressions of fear reflect not only a conditioned response but also a reinforcement of the behavior expected of them, such as not leaving the house and staying close to a protected space.

The mothers’ testimonies in the focus group support the evidence of the children’s perceptions of a lack of adult protection. It is clearly evident that the Bedouin children’s mothers perceive themselves as a disadvantaged group, excluded from sources of power and influence. In the mothers’ testimonies there is a sense of the parents’ inability to protect their children, which engenders feelings of guilt, confusion, anger, and hostility. However, evident in the children’s testimonies is the crucial importance of the mothers as a source of available emotional support, albeit ineffective from a cognitive standpoint.

Several researchers describe stress situations as leading to a heightened sense of solidarity and social cohesion. However, the findings of the present study suggest that the sense of solidarity in the Bedouins of the Negev involves ascribing aggression and violence to Israel and denying that Israel’s actions in Gaza constitute a legitimate means of defending its citizens. In this situation it is difficult to develop and identify with Israeli citizenship. Haj-Yahia contends that the situation is further complicated by the fact that in Palestinian society the extended family plays a significant role in providing instrumental, emotional, cognitive, and social support to relatives in times of crisis and hardship. This support preserves bitter memories in the family, which become part of the family narrative on which children are raised. We can perhaps look in admiration at the manner in which the Negev Bedouins have endured and survived in the face of the establishment’s ongoing refusal to legitimize to their claims to settlement in unrecognized villages, neglect of the education and health systems, and poor environmental development. Yet, it is hard to ignore the difficulty that Bedouin children face in developing healthy processes of integrating their identities, the ability to live the reality, to feel a sense of belonging, and to simultaneously be Palestinians, Bedouins, Muslims, and Israeli citizens. The lack of a coherent worldview, and the inability of adult family members to provide the necessary mediation to develop such a worldview, is expected to harm the children’s emotional resilience. And this lack of resilience, in turn, is
expected to have a negative influence on their capacity for post-traumatic growth: Studies have observed a strong, positive relationship between emotional resilience and post-traumatic growth, a relationship that is likely to be attributable to the role of resilience in restoring one’s sense of control and trust in the world.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate a need to provide the Bedouin community with means of offering its children cognitive and emotional assistance, to enable them to develop elements of salutogenic resilience. This assistance cannot remain in the confines of the resilience workshops familiar to psychologists active in homogeneously formed societies. These workshops are usually aimed at the individual’s intrapsychic, internal-emotional sphere. Work with the Bedouin children must accord a significant place to exploring the issue of social identity and the complex identification with the weak and harmed, who are also associated with the source of threat to physical security. The sense of impaired coherence leads to destruction of reality perceptions, and engenders sociopolitical beliefs and attitudes that are liable to hinder development of a generation open to a fertile dialogue between social groups with regard to historical and present-day conflicts and disputes. Moreover, failure to provide children with cognitive and emotional treatment will perpetuate a situation of anxiety and a sense of helplessness, and will hinder development of personal resilience for effectively coping with post-traumatic symptoms, which leave traces even after the cessation of hostilities. Any such assistance program must be undertaken in full collaboration with the families and educators, with special emphasis placed on exploring their difficulties in coping with the situation.

Bedouin culture, tradition, narrative, difficulties, and tribal and familial solidarity are all basic elements of building and operating a plan of action that will provide an answer to the cognitive and emotional needs of the Bedouin children, especially the hardships emerging in the wake of the protracted threat of war, and the unique social situation in which they are growing up.

NOTES


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15. The quotations are from different children.
23. For explanation of the term salutogenic, see Aaron Antonovsky, “The Salutogenic Model as a Theory to Guide Health Promotion”, *Health Promotion International*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 11–18.