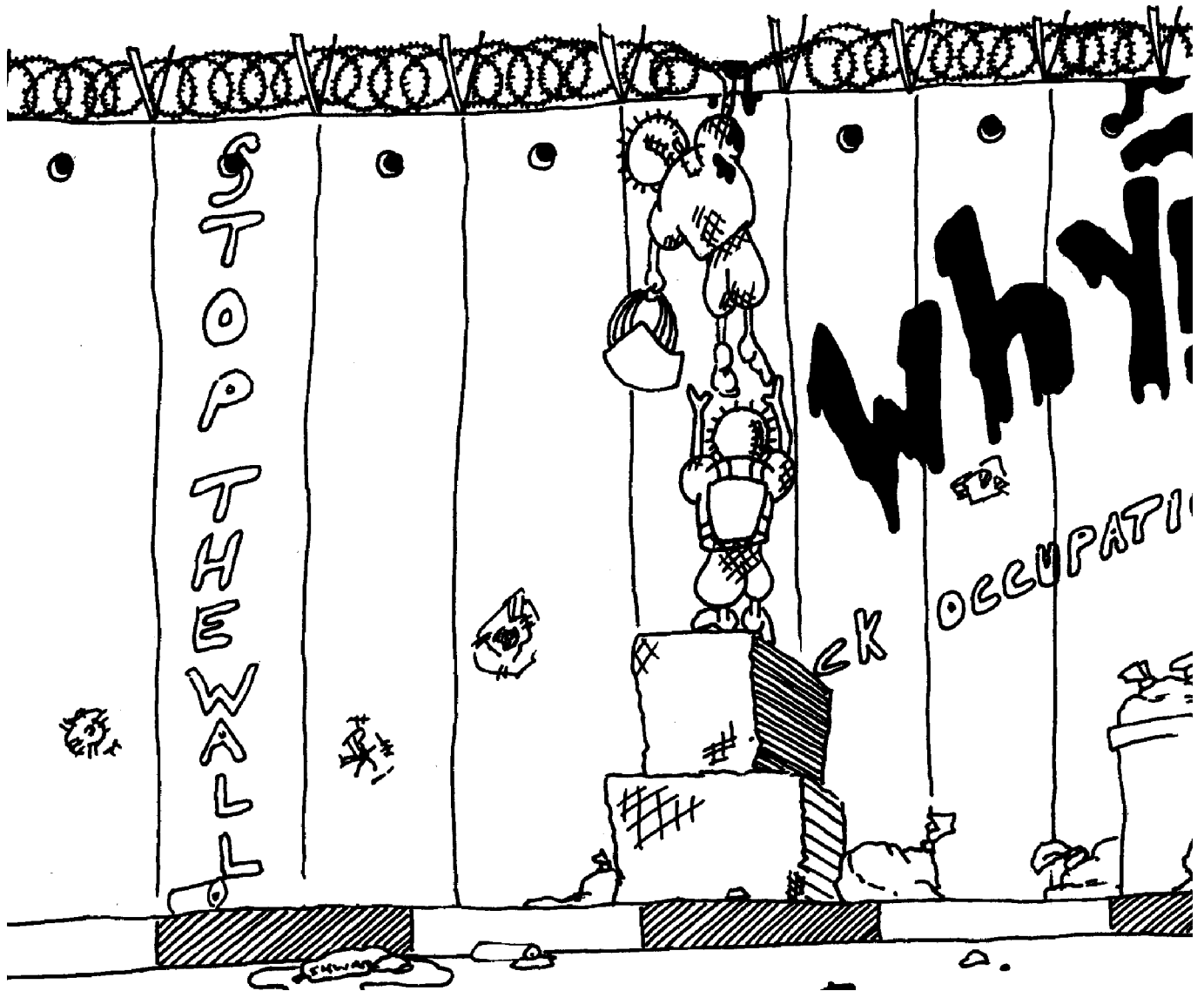


# Children in Palestine



*Going to School*

The Palestinian demographic is weighted heavily toward the youth, in which the majority of the population is under the age of eighteen. In the Gaza Strip, it is estimated that the median age is nearly 15 years old. This generation and those preceding it know nothing but military occupation and war.

They are often called the 'lost generation' as they have been robbed of the tools and structures by which to develop a normal life.

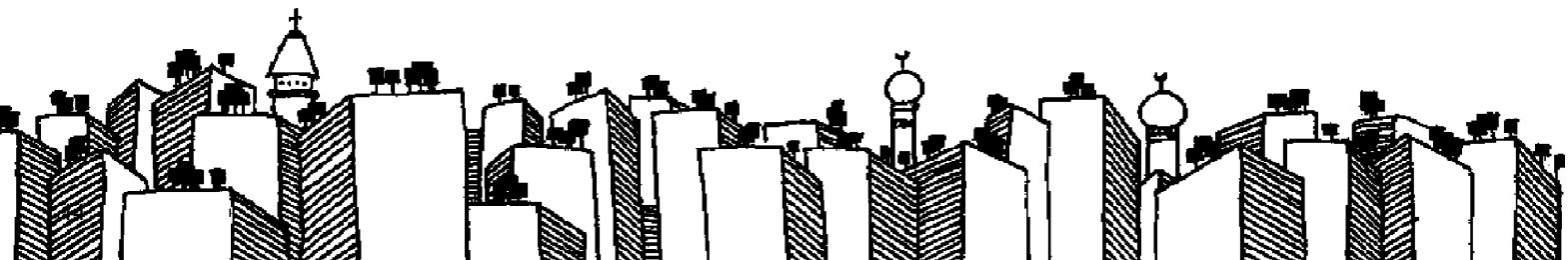
In a reality where the adults are engaged in daily violence and aggression, the emotion and outlook of young Palestinians is built upon anger, loss and trauma. All Palestinian children can tell you about their relationship to the occupation and the horrors they have witnessed at such a young and vulnerable age - from death to injury to daily humiliation. Many children, far more than in other countries, suffer from acute psychological, emotional and social problems which exhibit themselves in a variety of ways.

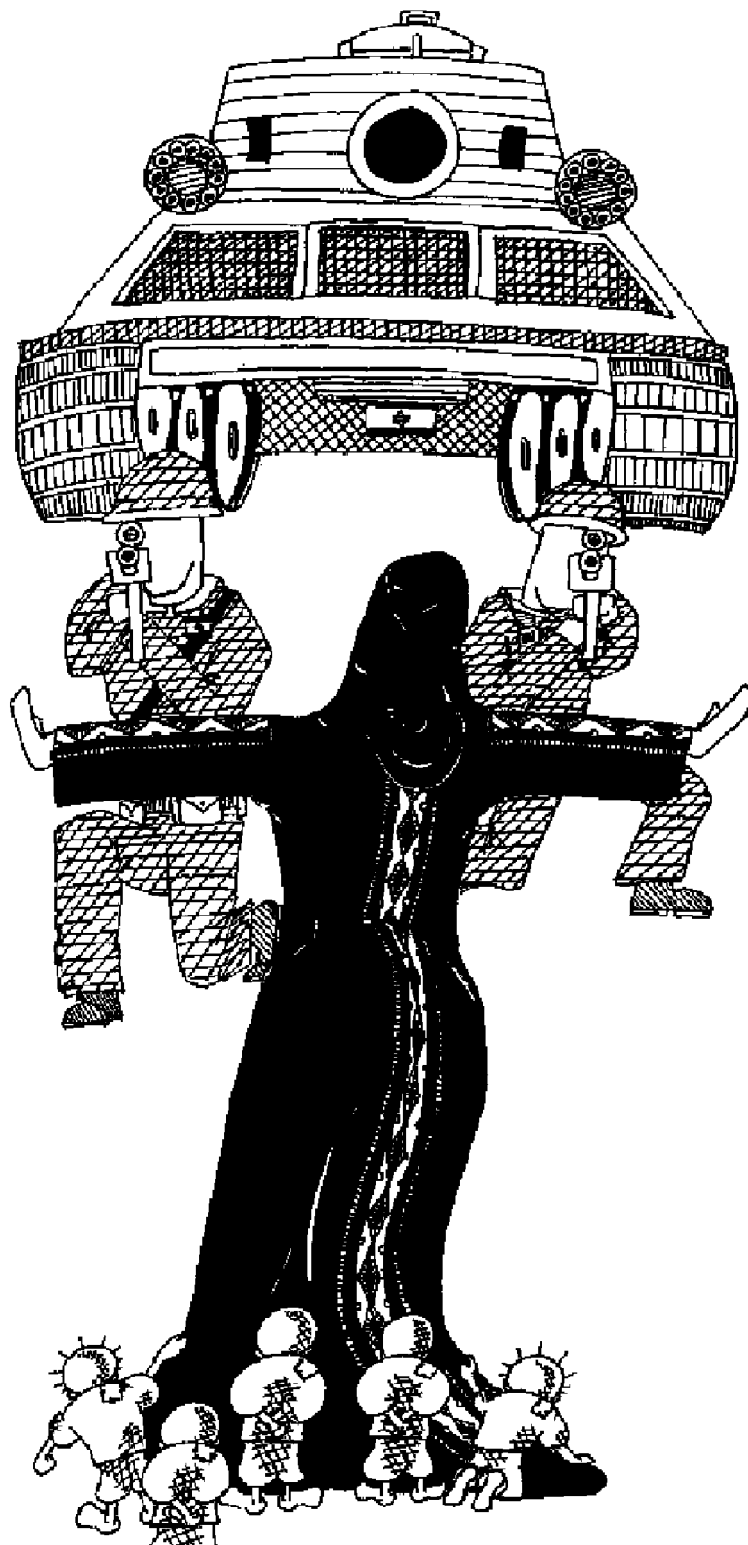
It is commonly said that 'the children are our future', and that this brutal conflict must come to an end so that they will have the opportunity to live and develop in a peaceful secure environment.

The following chapter attempts to outline why we have failed as Israelis and Palestinians to provide this environment, and how the standard of living for Palestinian children has declined along the same trajectories as the Palestinian economy. This is unacceptable according to every national and international law, standard or moral code. Moreover, it makes peace that much harder to reach between our two peoples.

The children of the 'lost generation' have, more often than not, never met an Israeli who was unarmed, unafraid, and not dealing with them from a position of power. To them, the guard at the checkpoint represents all Israelis; and within this they have found something to fear and hate.

Soon this 'lost generation' will arrive to their adulthood knowing only occupation, and nothing what-so-ever of peace. It is them with whom peace will have to be struck, and it is their accumulated anger and trauma which will sit on the opposite side of the negotiating table. To those who say that there have been no real 'partner for peace' before on the Palestinian side...wait until you meet the ones with no hope at all.





# Education

Though Palestine is often cited as the most educated society in the Arab world, it is a very misleading notion. In order to achieve the level of education that they have, incredible obstacles to their learning and access to learning have to be overcome on a daily basis.

Classrooms are crowded, and the school day has been shortened dramatically to coincide with cuts in public funding resulting from the Israeli and international sanctions on Palestine following the 2006 election of Hamas.

The occupation, which affects virtually every area of life in Palestine, has not made the education of children any easier. Stories abound throughout the West Bank of children being hampered or harassed on their way to school by either the Israeli army or settlers. The schoolhouses themselves, meant to be sanctuaries where children can feel safe, have often been the site of Israeli incursions or clashes between the army and militants.

In spite of these and many more challenges, Palestine has many impressive statistics to show the world in terms of its education.

According to a 2006 study by UNESCO, male and female youth aged 15-24 have a 99% literacy rate (1)

Meanwhile, the gross primary school enrollment for male and female youth sat at 89% and 88% respectively (2).

# In Conflict

The conflict between Israel and Palestine has disproportionately affected children, who often find themselves directly in the line of fire in a war where neither side can seem to draw the line between civilian and combatant.

According to Defense of Children International (DCI), whose field workers document each case of child death or injury, a total of 974 Palestinian children were killed in the seven years from the onset of the second Intifada to the opening of the Annapolis Peace Conference (5). The vast majority of these deaths came as a result of Israeli air and ground assaults into Palestinian Territory. The second most common cause of death is cited as 'random Israeli gunfire' (6)

Since the talks began at the end of last year until September of 2008, the firing has not stopped. As a result, 79 Palestinian children have been killed, and a further 370 injured. During this same period of time, 4 Israeli children have been killed and a further 11 injured as a result of the conflict (7).

Though it has been widely reported, there are no credible publications citing the number of child fatalities in the month of October 2008. In spite of this the reader should be made aware that this disturbing statistic is expected to rise in comparison to previous months.

The 2008 Palestinian Olive Harvest has been met with intense violence from the settlers making it one of the bloodiest autumns in recent memory.

# In Israeli Prisons

Contrary to international norms and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Israel is a signatory, children under the age of 16 in the oPT can be arrested, tried and treated in the same manner as adults.

Israel has often chosen to sidestep both its own regulations, and those of the UN Convention by charging and sentencing children as young as twelve years old.

Between the ages of 12-14, children can be sentenced for offenses for a period of up to 6 months. After the age of 14, Palestinian children are tried as adults. There are no juvenile courts, and children are often detained in centers together with adults (8).

This practice is also illegal according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that "every child deprived of liberty shall be separated from adults unless it is considered in the child's best interest not to do so" (9). Over the last eight years an estimated 6,700 Palestinian children were arrested and detained in Israeli prison facilities and treated in the same manner as adults (10).



# Child Psychology

The ongoing occupation of Palestine, and the humanitarian crisis which it entails, is an endless source of trauma in Palestine, especially among the young who lack the understanding and coping skills of adults. Furthermore, those adults who are mentally ill or affected by the occupation bring their traumas home where their wives and families bear the brunt.

According to Dr. Eyad El Sarraj, 'the psychological effects of violence (on children) are severe and traumatizing. While many injured children have acquired a permanent physical disability, many more have developed psychological impairments. The prevalence of neurotic symptoms and behavioural problems among children, such as disobedience or irritability, is high. According to recent research in the Gaza Strip, some 32.7% of children suffer severe levels of post-traumatic stress disorder, 49% moderate levels, and 16% low levels' (11).

According to World Health Organization's Rajiah Abu Swai, 'children are more vulnerable (to mental illness). It is particularly important for children to be able to grow up in a situation in which they can feel secure and in which they do not experience fear. It is essential that they can sense that their parents are protecting them... When the Second Intifada started in 2001, there were many incursions, shellings and bombings into the West bank and in Gaza.'

'In parallel, there were more recorded instances of violence in schools as well as aggression, nightmares and bedwetting at home. This is normal, because when a child sees that his parents are as scared as he is and are unable to control or stop a negative situation, he will become even more frightened or anxious' (12).



*'Children have the right to be protected from being hurt and mistreated, physically or mentally. Governments should ensure that children are properly cared for and protect them from violence, abuse and neglect by their parents, or anyone else who looks after them.'*

*-Article 19 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child*

## Endnotes

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