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Who are the Palestinian Children Against Whom Israel Has Launched a Genocide?

This essay provides an overview of some of the main issues facing Palestinian children today. Palestinian children are not accurately represented in mainstream discourse on them. While Palestinian children need humanitarian aid, such aid is not addressing the structural and root causes of their distress. Despite these children's suffering, they find ways to resist.

Any essay about Palestinian children must first start with clarifying that Palestinian children are not the aggressors. On the contrary, long before October 7th, 2023 – the onset of the current genocidal violence against Palestinian children – and for nearly a century, the children of Palestine have been on the receiving end of a system of terrorizing settler colonialism and ethnic cleansing administered by Israel.¹ In the words of David Ben Gurion, the leader of the 20th century Zionist movement that sought the Judaification of historic Palestine to set up a Jewish-only state:

Let us not ignore the truth among ourselves [...] politically we are the aggressors, and they defend themselves [...] The country is theirs, because they inhabit it, whereas we want to come here and settle down. [...]²

In this essay, my goal is to bring much needed attention to the Palestinian children of Gaza who are the object of a genocide, despite the International Court of Justice declaring in 2024 that Israel should take steps to prevent genocide. I will make three points, based on over a decade of my own research on and teaching about Palestinian young people:

1) The reigning narrative on Palestinian children dehumanizes them, fueling the war on them.

2) While humanitarian aid is much needed, it is not the long-term solution for Palestinian children's trauma, which is caused by a structural and ongoing process of settler colonialism.

3) Palestinian children know and express resistance daily, despite their lack of formal citizenship.

The conventional narratives of Palestinian children

At least 18,832 Palestinian children and 179 Israeli children have been killed by someone from the opposing side since 2000.³ International law prohibits disproportionate violence in armed conflict, yet the mainstream narrative is that Israel's excessive harm to Palestinian children is justified. Golda Meir, the fourth Prime Minister of Israel, infamously said: "When peace comes we will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons. Peace will come when the Arabs will love their children more than they hate us."⁴ The narrative that Palestinian children are violent cedes moral credibility to Israel, as if one side (Israel) practices legitimate forms of warfare and the other side (Palestine) illegitimate ones. Israel and its allies incorrectly perpetuate myths that Hamas builds command centers in children's schools and under hospitals, launches rockets from children's playgrounds and uses children as human shields. During Operation Cast led in 2009, President Shimon Peres said, "Unlike Hamas we know how to give security to our children, defend the children, not use them as human shields and not send them out in front of us."⁵ Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel paid for an advertisement in American newspapers in 2014 that stated "Jews rejected child sacrifice [...] 3500 year ago. Now it is Hamas' turn."⁶ At the outset of the war on Gaza in October 2023, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken wrote: "Palestinian civilians are not to blame for Hamas's atrocities or for the grave humanitarian crisis in Gaza. They are its victims."⁷ No credible human rights organization or UN body has ever substantiated the Palestinians' systematic use of civilian locations as storage warehouses for weapons or launching bases for attacks.

What Israel and its allies are doing in perpetuating this narrative is capitalizing on the image of innocent children to assert that Israel is, in fact, saving Palestinian children from their own backward culture. They are using a reverse logic of portraying themselves as the saviors of Palestinian children.

One need only look at the current war in which Israel Defense Forces portray themselves as magnanimously sending out incubators to Gazan hospitals without a larger discussion of the destruction that caused this need.⁸ This false narrative of the Palestinian child needing to be saved has over the years enabled Israel's impunity for violence against Palestinian children. To cite one basic example, Israeli army's use of Palestinian children as human shields was not deemed illegal by the Israeli High Court until 2005, after which it has continued to occur.⁹ Hedi Viterbo finds that Israeli state agents seek to conceal, deny, and obscure Israeli violence against Palestinians or display transgressions as perpetrated by "a few rotten apples."¹⁰ We also know that Israel benefits economically from the killing of Palestinian children, who are living laboratories for the Israeli weapons industry that produces and exports the weapons it tests on Palestinians. These weapon exports help drive the Israeli economy.¹¹

In sum, Israel perpetuates in overt and cunning ways a simplistic "security threat" narrative about Palestinian children and their parents that serves to further its killing of them. So, what is the full story? Who are Palestinian children?

Palestinian children as targets of settler colonial elimination

Palestinian children are just like any of the children you know – they like to play, go to school, dream, dance, make music, enjoy treats. But they are also targets in a nearly century-long settler colonial project, which seeks to eliminate the native to replace with the colonizer. Settler colonialism is hallmarked by a "logic of elimination" – namely, the attempt to establish and perpetually sustain a colonial society in the expropriated territory by culturally, socially, or physically destroying the Indigenous population, as happened in countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The central ideology that drives Israeli settler colonialism is political Zionism, or the movement to establish a Jewish homeland that emerged among the brutally persecuted Eastern European Jewry at the end of the nineteenth century. Israel was born from an historical moment when western countries sanctioned and facilitated political Zionists to form a settler colonial state and ethnically cleanse the existing population on the ground and put them in "cages" where they remain until today.

Where do the children fit in? They are the targets in this settler colonial project. The process by which political Zionism uses young Palestinian bodies as political capital to create, build, and maintain the state of Israel is called “unchildling” - a term coined by Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian based on what Palestinian children themselves describe¹². In settler colonialism, attacking the opponent’s children has strategic value because it causes instability to the family and the social structure, which can lead to multi-generational damage including epigenetic changes. Attacking children is strategic also because it eliminates future generations of resistance. It destroys the child’s right to play and hence the development necessary to create healthy functioning as adults. Targeting children is strategic because the mere existence of indigenous children in a settler colonial space haunts the settler and stands in the way of the existence of the settler colonial state as a finished product (*fait accompli*).

For Israeli authorities, age is an indispensable governance tool. Israel takes a very flexible use of age to define childhood for Palestinian children. Israeli criminal legislation in the occupied territories is known to have constructed the age of majority lower for Palestinians than for Israeli settlers and the courts still can sentence children as adults¹³. In looking at hundreds of Israeli military court judgments, Viterbo finds that Israeli judges of Palestinian children pick and choose when they want to use the young age category¹⁴. Another way age is a tool for control is expressed through Israel’s practice of holding child prisoners. The military courts lack basic fundamental due-process guarantees, with the majority of Palestinian children being denied access to their family or a lawyer until the first appearance in military court. Palestinian children, typically arrested in their homes at night, are subject to physical, psychological, and verbal abuse in detention centers in order to obtain false confessions¹⁵. Considered by most in the international community to be in violation of several articles of the Geneva Conventions, 60% of Palestinian child detainees serve their sentences in prisons in Israel, where their family cannot visit them regularly because of restrictions on movement.¹⁶ The Israeli juvenile justice system offers different means of rehabilitation to Palestinian children versus their Jewish Israeli counterparts accused of similar offences¹⁷.

Not only does Israel systematically disregard children’s rights in order to control the Palestinian population, Viterbo’s work shows that Israel pursues a much more sophisticated action to use children’s rights to legitimize its violence against Palestinian children. In other words, Israel uses the term

children's rights to oppress children. For example, in the Israeli age-based food quotas in Gaza, from 2007–2010, the Israeli military documents divided the Gazan population into age groups, allocating each a certain number of calories. Israel provided just enough food to children to live but not thrive. It did this based on international law, which allows for the drawing of distinctions. Food rations were a way for Israel to micromanage life in Gaza, as well as an attempt to gain legitimacy abroad by using the language of international law and portraying its food restrictions as humane and in the best interest of children. Meanwhile, they provided highly processed calories and sugars stunting the growth curves where Gazan children fall behind the world average¹⁸.

Another example of how Israel uses age to carry out its system of control is through children's education and welfare. The living conditions for children in Gaza have been so unbearable, even before the ongoing war, that it makes raising children, schooling them, feeding them, and providing health care almost impossible. Even before this war, 53% of Palestinians in Gaza lived in poverty and 71% suffered from depression.¹⁹ According to a Save the Children report in 2022, three out of five children in Gaza are self-harming (highest rate in the world), more than half of them say they have contemplated suicide, and 80% reported being in a perpetual state of fear, worry, sadness, and grief.

A little Palestinian boy describes to his sister his daily life in Gaza today:

Rima, I lost six kilograms in less than two weeks. We eat one meal a day because there is not enough food. But that's probably best because then we won't have to go to the bathroom and wait hours in line. Our cat, Bees, got depressed and died. Don't worry, I made her a coffin and buried her. I take advantage of any lull in the bombing to sleep. I wake up, I wait for night to come, and then I sleep again. I don't know what to do. There's no school, no internet, no football. We're broken, we're living the most primitive life. I walked under the bombs for about 45 minutes to find the internet to speak to you. I know it's late, 1 a.m., but I know you can't sleep, and I know how your heart aches for us.²⁰

Palestinian childhood trauma cannot be cured with humanitarian aid or a biomedical approach

The conventional approach to “helping” Palestinian children has been to try to throw humanitarian aid and western systems of mental health at them. These traumatized children need much more than this, which goes beyond the reach of humanitarian agencies like Save the Children or Doctors Without Borders. The “trauma project” as some have come to refer to the humanitarian aid now thrown at those suffering “inner wounds” can also silence the diversity and complexity of experiences. Mainstream studies conceive children’s trauma as quantifiable by objective numerical biometric measures, such as bedwetting and nightmares, which are no doubt profound. An exclusive biomedical focus, however, risks obfuscating children’s invisible wounds. Palestinian mental health expert Rita Giacaman prefers the concept of “social suffering” to convey the impacts of war on Palestinians, which the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders) does not capture²¹. Conventional trauma metrics often conceive of war violence as something that occurs in short, time-bound episodes, like hearing or witnessing shelling, bombing, home demolition, and killing of close relatives. However, this does not account for a near century of trauma children have experienced and inherited intergenerationally.

The language of trauma – much like the language of children’s rights which I showed – can be co-opted to decontextualize the larger issues. Even big funding proposals for trauma aid to Palestinians can be problematic and serve Israeli interests²².

Children’s resistance

So where do we go from here? We know that children, regardless of culture, need to feel they can have an impact on their surroundings and have purpose to experience healthy development.

For as much as Israel tries to take power away from Palestinian children, they find ways to resist. In large part, they resourcefully rely on what is available to them: their bodies (in flesh and mind). They practice “lived resistance”²³. We must of course not confuse resistance with resiliency – which is itself a troubled narrative²⁴. Also, we must be cautious of the word “resistance” since Israel also uses the word to incriminate Palestinian children.

Unfortunately, in the world today, there is no Palestinian posterchild like Ann Frank garnering the same kind of attention. But Palestinian young people do resist. On social media, for example, Afaf Ahmed posts on Instagram with updates about Gaza for the world to see. During the Great March of Return in 2018–2019, young people held a series of Friday border protests in the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian Youth Movement operates across borders trying to bring attention to many issues. In 2009, the children in Gaza went for the world record in kite flying, saying they wanted for themselves the same freedom as the kites in the sky. In November 2023, Palestinian children held a Children's Congress, pleading for their protection before the bombed hospital of al-Shifa, where almost half of the injured were children. Such young people lack all conventional political, economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. But they demand justice with all they have: their body in mind and flesh.

In conclusion, a genocide without accountability is unfolding before our eyes, and it seems without end. The question remains how it will be remembered. This essay provides an account from the perspective of someone who has lived in the West Bank and researched and published widely on Palestinians. The dehumanization of Palestinian children is used to justify their slaughter. Humanitarian aid is much needed in this part of the world, but it is often a proxy for the structural and ongoing process of settler colonialism. As the children in Gaza die and suffer, they nonetheless express resistance daily.

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- 2 As quoted in Chomsky 1983, 91.
- 3 “If Americans Only Knew” (date accessed September 10, 2024) <https://ifamericansknew.org/stat/children.html>
- 4 Meir 1973.
- 5 See “Peres: Unlike Hamas, Israel Protects its Children” (October 26, 2009) <https://www.haaretz.com/2009-10-26/ty-article/peres-unlike-hamas-israel-protects-its-children/0000017f-e237-d804-ad7f-f3ff48920000>
- 6 See Steve Almasy and Josh Levs, “Nobel Laureate Wiesel: Hamas must stop using children as human shields” (August 3, 2014) <https://www.cnn.com/2014/08/03/world/meast/elie-wiesel-hamas-ad/index.html>
- 7 Antony Blinken, “Defending Israel is essential. So is aiding civilians in Gaza” (October 31, 2023) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/10/31/antony-blinken-biden-aid-ukraine-israel-gazans/>
- 8 See for example “As outrage grows over fate of babies in Gaza hospital, Israel offers incubators and fuel” (November 14, 2023) <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/israel-offers-incubators-fuel-gaza-hospital-outrage-grows-rcna125053>
- 9 Viterbo 2021, 294.
- 10 Ibid, 232–259.
- 11 See “Dirty Secret of Israel’s weapons exports: They’re tested on Palestinians” (November 17, 2023) <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/17/israels-weapons-industry-is-the-gaza-war-its-latest-test-lab>
- 12 Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2019.
- 13 Viterbo 2012.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Alruzzi et al. 2024.
- 16 Morrison 2024, 30.
- 17 Odeh 2024.
- 18 Viterbo 2021.
- 19 See United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs “53 per cent of Palestinians in Gaza live in poverty, despite humanitarian assistance” (June 5, 2018) <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/53-cent-palestinians-gaza-live-poverty-despite-humanitarian-assistance> and World Bank Group et al. “Mental Health in the West Bank and Gaza” (November 22, 2022). https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099153502102330181/pdf/P17925303fca130e30936d016a378b6a1e9.pdf?_gl=1*na9a97*_gcl_au*MTE0MTYzNjQ0NS4xNzI1OTg4NzUz.
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