

When justice fails. Violence and mental health in Palestine

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We are a team of mental health researchers and practitioners from King's College London, Birzeit University, and the Palestinian Counselling Centre who are calling for (1) an immediate end to Israeli-sponsored violence against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, Palestinian East Jerusalem and the West Bank; (2) an end to the siege of the Gaza Strip and the military occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem; and (3) an end to the structural violence and apartheid which is an integral part of Israel's settler-colonial regime.

The latest escalation of violence in May 2021, referred to by some as a third uprising (*intifada* in Arabic), takes place against the background of decades of settler-colonial oppression and systemic human rights violations. Human rights violations of this magnitude have lasting negative impacts on the social and economic fabric of society and people's health including their mental health and wellbeing. The following insights from our 5-year Wellcome Trust funded Mental Health and Justice participatory research project (2017-2021) with Palestinian psychosocial service providers and service users show clearly how Palestinians experience their mental illness as tightly interlinked with traumatic Israeli military occupation, social role and status-based discrimination, as well as ongoing daily stressors.



One autumn day in 2018, we had gathered in the shade of some olive trees when members of our participatory action research group started talking about their lives under military occupation.¹ Shaheen² who suffers from severe mental illness explained to us, “The Israelis occupied our country. Our generation will never forget this. In 1967, I was seven years old, we had to flee from the soldiers. We had to walk a lot and sleep under the olive trees. We had no place; we had no shelter. I

remember the soldiers and how the army planes bombed us.” It was in 1967 that the West Bank and Gaza Strip fell under Israeli military rule with the Palestinian population enduring chronic exposure to political violence, human rights abuses, discrimination and insecurity.

Adel, another member of our research group, reflected on this ongoing Israeli army and settler violence against Palestinians saying, “At night there are problems in this town with the Israeli soldiers.” Shaheen agreed, explaining that due to the insecurity, “Some of us don't go out.” Adel continued, “There are always clashes in the afternoon. Almost every night soldiers enter the town early in the morning and arrest people. In the afternoon

¹ The participatory action research group consisted of 12 persons with severe mental illness, counsellors and researchers from Birzeit University and King's College London. Together, we explore what it means for persons with severe mental illness to live and participate in the community by focusing on what “community”, “independence” and “support” mean; how barriers and resources affect the ability of people with mental illness and their families to access support; what specialized/ non-specialized services are available to support and enable community living. More information about the project [here](#).

² Names of participatory action group members are pseudonyms in order to protect their identity.

Palestinian youth defend themselves throwing rocks and then, in the night, the soldiers return to arrest them.”



Several of the men in our group had sustained injuries during violent encounters with Israeli occupation forces and incarceration in Israeli military prisons. These, they reasoned, were linked to the onset of their mental and psychosocial disabilities. One of the men had been hit by a teargas canister while in a demonstration when he was still a teenager. Two others had experienced torture in Israeli prisons. Mazen told us, “It [the mental illness] all started when I was imprisoned by the Israelis – I was kept in prison for many days. The soldiers tortured me and beat me on my head. I had to sleep and eat in the prison bathroom. They beat me so hard, I couldn’t stand up anymore. They broke my nerves. From the prison, I was taken directly to the

hospital and the doctor explained that I had suffered a mental breakdown.” Since then, his wellbeing depends on the care of his family and psychotropic medication, which is not always available in the Palestinian public health clinics. He contemplated, “People think that I am a crazy person and my friends abandoned me as they don’t understand me. This makes me sad and angry and I think a lot.”

The experiences of our research group members make clear that experiences of violence have a long afterlife as memories and embodied traumas affecting people’s ability to live healthy and fulfilled lives in relationships with others. This will also be true for the violence we have witnessed erupting in East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank in May 2021. It started out with peaceful demonstrations in solidarity with several Palestinian households facing eviction from their homes at the hands of a right-wing Israeli settler group in Sheikh Jarrah. As the movement grew, Israeli police forces sought to repress the demonstrators with rubber coated bullets, skunk water, tear gas, and stun grenades while some settler groups formed lynch mobs armed with guns to quell the Palestinians’ struggle for their homes and land. This violent repression culminated when Israeli forces attacked Palestinian worshippers during Ramadan prayers at al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest site in Islam. Hamas posed an ultimatum demanding Israeli forces withdraw from the al-Aqsa mosque and the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood. When it was not met, the first Hamas rockets were launched into Israel.

Israel retaliated through a massive and indiscriminate bombing campaign with fighter jets and mobilisation of ground artillery against people in the Gaza Strip. Around 253 Palestinians lost their lives, including 66 children, 39 women, and 17 elderly people. There are almost 1,950 injured people most of whom require hospital treatment. With limited electricity and a critical shortage of essential drugs and supplies, medical facilities are struggling to provide much needed care including surgery. Twenty-two healthcare facilities, including Gaza’s only lab for testing coronavirus cases, have been destroyed or damaged as well as roads leading to hospitals. In addition, Israeli bombs have destroyed or damaged countless family homes, the media tower, and cultural facilities such as bookshops and community centres. Rebuilding social life and infrastructure will take years, and it is feared

that Israel's influence over the international aid effort (especially UN organisations) will lead to further dehumanisation and traumatising of Palestinians and impede access to resources to rebuild vital healthcare facilities, homes and services.

Such traumatic experiences and immense suffering will have long-term mental health consequences for adults and children directly and in-directly exposed including PTSD, depression and anxiety as well as more severe mental and psychosocial disabilities. For people with pre-existing mental health conditions, such as psychotic illness or intellectual disabilities, the impact of conflict on the ability of families to provide care, which has been already difficult, can become impossible. Access to vital care, support and medicines can be disrupted leading to relapse.

While members of our participatory action group were themselves not directly exposed to the violence, witnessing fellow Palestinians being humiliated and killed was experienced as extremely distressing and frightening. Layla told us, for example, "The Israeli soldiers closed the roads between cities, and I was filled with horror. I sorrowed for the people who were killed in Gaza and I felt like crying. I asked God to award victory to Gaza." Fares was also deeply troubled saying, "I felt very sad seeing martyrs and injured people. My heart starts to beat quickly, I lose my appetite in eating, and I cry when I see such scenes. Therefore, I try to avoid watching the news. I went to the pharmacy and I got an injection because I felt so sad. I usually get this injection when I feel sad." Like him, Shaheen could not bear to watch the news anymore explaining that "watching people under the bombed buildings hurt me" and Adel empathised, "The situation hasn't affected me, but I felt bad for the people who were killed."

The violence we are witnessing affects not only those directly targeted, but the community at large by both opening existing inner wounds of war while creating new ones which may never heal. We believe that addressing the political root causes of violence and injustice is as much a mental health imperative as is improving access to medical treatment. Indeed, improving access to treatment without holding Israel accountable for its human rights violations and addressing the multiple injustices will have only very limited effect on the health and wellbeing of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation and siege.

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The illustrations are by Amer Shomali and form part of our forthcoming illustrated storybook "Get to know us! Our life with mental illness in the community"