

# GAZA: politics, art and therapy

## There are no safe places

Peter Offord describes his recent visit to Gaza to explore therapeutic approaches there



Peter Offord with children outside the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) school in Gaza

This article is a description of my recent experience of the problems of entering Gaza to take in art materials and my attempt to gain some insight into therapeutic approaches there. It is not the study of art therapy within a conflict zone that I had hoped to produce (my plans for that had to be abandoned) but a description of the difficulties of getting the basic materials for the work into a zone of political and military conflict. It also describes the therapy work being carried out there under conditions of extreme deprivation and duress.

I have used background information from a variety of sources including a publication from Gaza, emails, internet search, personal conversations, printed material from the Palestine Trauma Centre (UK) and from papers and published literature within art therapy (see references and bibliography). For theoretical information I have relied primarily on the extensive work done by the Art Therapy Initiative by Bobby Lloyd and Debra Kalmanowitz.

*The level of violence in Gaza is unprecedented in recent decades.....There are no safe places.'*  
UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon (2009)

*"...wings spread out in the blue [sky]...hid[ing] under the bed trembling"; "clouds, shit...horror and despair" Picasso (1937)*

The complexities of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict are not the subject of this piece but represent the context and the main cause of psychological distress in this situation. Regarding my perspective on this controversial situation, I recognise that analysis is often affected by personal experience, and narratives are often shaped by partial, and even prejudiced, understandings. Since my experience has been primarily that of the suffering of the Palestinians this article has to be seen in that context. Nevertheless I have tried to be objective.

## The Gaza Strip – background

The Gaza Strip, 25 miles long and between 4 and 7 miles wide, lies along the Mediterranean coast on the south western tip of the 'fertile crescent'. It has a population of approximately 1.5 million, over 70 per cent of whom are refugees, many from what is described in the Arab world as 'the Nakba' (the catastrophe) meaning the mass forced exodus that followed the establishment of Israel in 1948. Fifty three percent of the population are below the age of eighteen. That is 742,200 children (Altawil 2010).

Britain had control of Palestine which included Gaza, for thirty years until 1947/48 when it relinquished its responsibilities to the UN. The Balfour Declaration, named after the British Foreign Secretary of 1917, formed the basis for establishing in the region a "national home for the Jewish people, it being clearly understood that nothing should be done which might prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

Israel occupied Gaza during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and maintained a military regime there until the creation of the Palestinian Authority in 1994.

Israel eventually withdrew its settlements from the Gaza Strip in 2005 but still controls the eastern, northern and western maritime borders. Egypt has nominal control of the Rafah crossing to the South but in reality Israel maintains strict control over this border. Egypt is currently completing construction of a steel wall at Rafah, funded by the US, which penetrates 20 metres down through the tunnels which is described by Gaza's Mayor as a 'wall of death'.

Meanwhile, smuggling via the Rafah tunnels, dug by the Palestinians of Gaza, has been the main route for trade, creating a black market and effectively disenfranchising the poor.

Egypt is host to around 70,000 Palestinian refugees and, like Gaza, is almost exclusively Sunni Muslim. Many Egyptians are desperately concerned about the Palestinian people and the plight of Gaza but the Egyptian Government is bound by an agreement with Israel, which is supported by the US, and has trade agreements with the EU and commercial interests with Britain.

Since the election by the people of Gaza of a Hamas Government in 2006, Israel has imposed border closures prohibiting certain goods including petrol, cars and spare parts for machinery, all of which are regarded by Israel as having potential for military use by Hamas. While one can understand, if not necessarily approve, of Israel's stance with respect to Hamas, it is difficult to understand other prohibitions imposed, which, for example include: crayons, books, newspapers and musical instruments, dried fruit, coriander, tea, coffee and pasta, fabric for industry, livestock and fruit juice (*The Economist*, 01.06 2010).



*Scene of destruction in Gaza: people re-claiming steel reinforcing rods and concrete rubble near the sea front.*

Some restrictions are baffling. For example boxes for transporting chicks are allowed but not the chicks to put in them. In addition to restrictions on goods entering the territory people requiring medical treatment have been either stopped or subjected to protracted delays that have resulted in fatalities, and families have become permanently separated.

As a result of these restrictions – an effective blockade of the territory – and the targeting of the civilian infrastructure, the economy of Gaza has virtually collapsed and Gaza now has the world's highest unemployment. In addition to the collapse of production on land and because of the lack of opportunities for trade, the fishing industry has dwindled as a result of the sea being polluted by raw sewage, following the destruction of sewage treatment plants and attacks by the Israeli navy (United Nations Relief and Works Agency [UNRWA], Updated Quick Response Plan 2009).

During the Israeli attack on Gaza

(codenamed Operation Cast Lead, 27 December 2008 – 17 January 2009) undertaken ostensibly in response to attacks on Israeli targets by Hamas militants, the local population suffered 1,421 deaths and approximately 5,000 wounded. On the other side 518 Israelis were injured and thirteen killed (UNRWA QRP 2009).

Gaza is one of the most densely populated regions of the world and the majority of these casualties were civilians. During the three week assault 44,000 refugee homes were hit along with hospitals, water supplies, and schools. Gaza's buildings, apartments and refugee camps now sit amidst 600,000 tonnes of rubble.

Even before the siege of Gaza began in 2006 it was estimated that 41% (305,195) of children in Gaza were suffering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Following Operation Cast Lead the figure rose to 98.7% which meant that almost all the children in Gaza: 700,000, need urgent medical and psychological help. (Altawil, 2010)

# GAZA: politics, art and therapy



*Child fetching water in Gaza City. Behind on the wall 'UNRWA' is painted. UNRWA had the wall painted by Gazan children as part of a project.*

## The Gaza Freedom March movement

Faced by the fact that Governments appeared to be doing little or nothing to ease this desperate situation, I, along with many others, decided to see if I could help in some way.

I soon became aware of the Gaza Freedom March movement via the internet. The prime organisers were a US women's peace movement but included members from all walks of life including the legal profession, former armed forces and diplomatic services, aid workers and peace activists. This broad spectrum included people such as a former US army colonel and diplomat, Ann Wright, Alice Walker, novelist, Hedy Epstein, an 85 year old Holocaust survivor and endorsers including Mairead Maguire, Nobel Peace Laureate, and Jewish linguist Noam Chomsky, to name but a few.

Its aims were to enter Gaza via Egypt, take in educational supplies, visit the devastated areas with UNRWA, meet local NGOs and join the Palestinians in a Gandhi and Mandela-inspired march to the Israeli-controlled Erez crossing in the north. There, the march was to be met by a group of Israeli and Palestinian delegates from the Israeli side of the crossing. Balloons were to be released to signify the meeting of the two populations across the buffer zone.

The Freedom March would be joined in Cairo by participants from forty-three countries including Turkish aid workers, European parliamentarians, health workers and qualified medical staff, many of whom were on the fated Gaza flotilla convoy in May of this year. At an information meeting in London in autumn 2009, I met the British volunteer staff of the Palestine Trauma Centre (PTC) who told me they had been trying to get

into Gaza to relieve the staff there and as an Art Therapist I felt an immediate affinity with these people.

The Gaza Freedom March (GFM) organisers were in talks with Hamas and the Egyptian authorities in order to gain authorisation to enter Gaza between Christmas and New Year, 2010. Speaking via Skype, the European coordinator advised us that UNWRA was running the food aid programme in Gaza, and that any food that we were able to bring in would be insufficient to benefit the population. We also learnt that the Viva Palestina convoy of over 200 trucks would be arriving to break the blockade during the Christmas period carrying food and building and construction supplies. So we were advised that the GFM's contribution would be to carry in educational materials. We were told that the situation could be highly volatile, that we may have difficulty getting into Gaza and also that there may be long delays getting out. Alternative plans were made should the march be stopped at Rafah. I decided I could help by taking in art materials to support therapy work at the Palestine Trauma Centre in Gaza and that I would record the experience on video.

I undertook St John's Ambulance First Aid training and set about gathering art materials and donations.

The benefits of art making within refugee camps and under conditions of conflict have been well documented by Kalmanowitz and Lloyd in their publications, papers and research (1997, 2005 etc). It has been argued, in an extension to Maslow's hierarchy, that individual creative needs aspire to transcend the basic requirements of food and shelter even in (perhaps especially in) circumstances of extreme deprivation. Creative expression encourages those qualities

identified in Maslow's intermediate levels like self confidence, self esteem, mutual respect etc. Art taps into creative aspects of the self and can provide a temporary sense of mastery in conditions that can be overwhelming and wholly beyond the control of individuals.

### Cairo to Gaza

Cairo, the 'mother of the world', is a sprawling conglomeration of glass fronted high-rise developments, motorways, noisy taxis, cafés and shady streets surrounded by a labyrinth of ancient and crumbling dwellings. It buzzes with life at all hours, punctuated by the call for prayers and is one of the most polluted cities in the world.

Arriving a few days before Christmas and the march's convening date of 27 December, we became aware of increasing security levels imposed 'for our own protection' by the Egyptian authorities. Pre-warned of the potential outcomes of this situation by an Egyptian journalist, a small group of us left for El Arish in northern Sinai, about 40 kilometres from Rafah. Arriving there, we heard that the security services in Cairo had invoked emergency law, banning meetings of more than six people and any demonstrations and had revoked the coach licences, stranding the 1,300 participants, including the chair of the PTC and training director. As we arrived in El Arish the security services blocked all roads and we were put under house arrest. The cancellation of the coaches provoked public outcry and demonstrations ensued in Cairo.

At this point, Suzanne Mubarak, the President's wife and Chair of the Red Crescent, intervened and an agreement was reached by which one hundred participants carrying aid could proceed. Two coaches left from Cairo, collected a few of us from El Arish and we



*Gaza City market. Stalls had a predominance of local grown fruit but a lack of imported food and meat. Over a million chickens were destroyed in Operation Cast Lead.*

arrived in Gaza in the early hours of 31st December. After three days of house arrest I had become angry at the Egyptian Government, as I experienced the authorities' attitude towards aid and support for Gaza and I was moved to take part in the march.

After a rapid coach journey through Gaza City we assembled at Eizbet Abed Rabo, a few kilometres from the Erez crossing. Arabic music played amidst calls to end the siege as about 1,000 of us, including internationals, Hasidic Jews and Hamas, walked alongside the disabled and wounded in wheel chairs, walked towards the Israeli border carrying banners and flags. Three hundred metres before the crossing we received a warning that if we proceeded further the Israeli Defence Force would open fire; we knelt down, called for peace and for Gaza to be free. Sitting beside me on the returning coach,

Moustafa, a Hamas minder and English teacher, spoke of his admiration for Shakespeare whilst quoting Macbeth and then recited lines from Yeats' *The Second Coming*:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,  
 and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.  
 .....but now I know  
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

# GAZA: politics, art and therapy



Fisherman in Gaza Port

## The Palestine Trauma Centre, Gaza city

The Gaza Strip has a total of twenty-five psychiatrists and twenty-five clinical psychologists. The PTC has three qualified psychiatrists and one child psychiatrist, two of whom are in administrative posts which they fulfil in addition to their clinical duties. The staff also includes psychologists, therapists, play therapists and support staff.

It is a non-governmental non-profit organisation set up in 2007 by Dr Altawil and is licensed by the Palestinian Ministry of Interior and Social Affairs and obtained charitable status in 2010. PTC Gaza is located on two floors of an apartment in the centre of the city and also operates from six outreach outpatient venues.

'The Palestine Trauma Centre for

*victims' welfare is the first centre in the Arab world which specialises in looking after war or occupation victims by integrating psychological and social therapies within traumatised communities.*

*It coordinates a number of therapies to rebuild support structures and maintain psychological health of the community, particularly the welfare of children.*

*It reacts to traumatic events by sending specialists into an area where they rebuild lives by dealing directly with families, doctors, social workers and teachers.*

*The PTC combines psychological therapy with social support to create a protection against future traumas and to help unify a fragmented society.'*

(PTC information leaflet)

## Four principal projects have been funded by PTC(UK):

- Emergency and Rapid Response project which dealt with the immediate aftermath of the Israeli Occupation – around 50,000 children and other family members were involved in psycho-social, medical, educational, creative and entertainment and therapeutic activities. The project ran from 29 December 2008, the second day of the Israeli invasion, and finished six months later.
- Psychosocial support for Gaza children - a total of 7,000 children and parents so far are involved in community mental health rehabilitation programmes between July 2009 and June 2010.
- Wellness and Focusing Project began January 2010 for families, children and their teachers, learning techniques to begin to



*Therapy room, Palestine Trauma Centre (PTC), Gaza*

cope with their ongoing trauma and the milder symptoms of PTSD. Eventually 5,000 people will benefit from this work.

- Family Therapy Project – a joint project with the University of Hertfordshire, Clinical Psychology Department and PTC. This aims to provide over eighteen months, treatment for around five hundred families who have been the most severely affected by the war – those whose homes were destroyed, or whose family members were killed or injured.

The UK staff are also running an Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) project, training clinicians to use EMDR in order to work with moderate to severe PTSD.

The Gaza Drama and Art Project is a project that encourages children to express themselves through painting and drawing, then through drama and

theatre, as a way of rebuilding confidence, healing psychological wounds, strengthening emotional resilience, helping to prevent breakdown and psychosis, and using their energies in productive, imaginative and creative ways.

The staff informed me that following Operation Cast Lead they were receiving four hundred referrals a week and had handled 50,000 cases of children and family members since 17 January, the end of hostilities. The staff themselves were now experiencing psychological and emotional exhaustion and were exhibiting symptoms of complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

### **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

Stages of trauma:

- Primary stage: the initial trauma and the immediate shock - the immediate

effects of the incident/ attack etc. and the psychological effects of physical trauma in the event of a wound/mutilation or the loss of limb.

- Secondary stage: numbness, blunting of emotion, dissociation from the event.
- Tertiary stage: the realisation and adjustment to the loss of limb/ wound /mutilation and concomitant psychological effects related to the injury associated with the realisation of changed circumstances.
- Fourth stage: adjustment to physical, environmental, social and personal circumstances i.e. whether the event was isolated and life continues within norms or whether the circumstances that created the trauma continue (see Additional Circumstances below).

# GAZA: politics, art and therapy



A painting project by UNRWA in Gaza city engaging children to paint the school walls

Further concomitant effects: the impact on those closest - the psychological impact of having lost a family member or the changes that have taken place to the family member, which can have damaging consequences for family relationships.

In Gaza there is an additional

complication - addiction. In the total absence of appropriate psychiatric medication due to border restrictions, Tramadol (a powerful synthetic opioid with narcotic effect) is prescribed to stabilise some of the symptoms of mental health problems like depression, anxiety and feelings of hopelessness. This was smuggled

in through the tunnels and staff were reporting high levels of unsubscribed use, abuse and addiction. Hamas recently confiscated and burned all black-market Tramadol in an effort to eradicate illicit use. (*The Independent*, April, 2010).

Within the ongoing political violence there are reports of increasing domestic violence.

PTSD can start after any traumatic event, in particular a situation of danger, where life is threatened, or where other people are dying or being injured. It can start after a delay of weeks, or even months. The symptoms usually appear within six months of a traumatic event.

## Reactions to a traumatic event

Many people feel grief-stricken, depressed, anxious, guilty and angry.

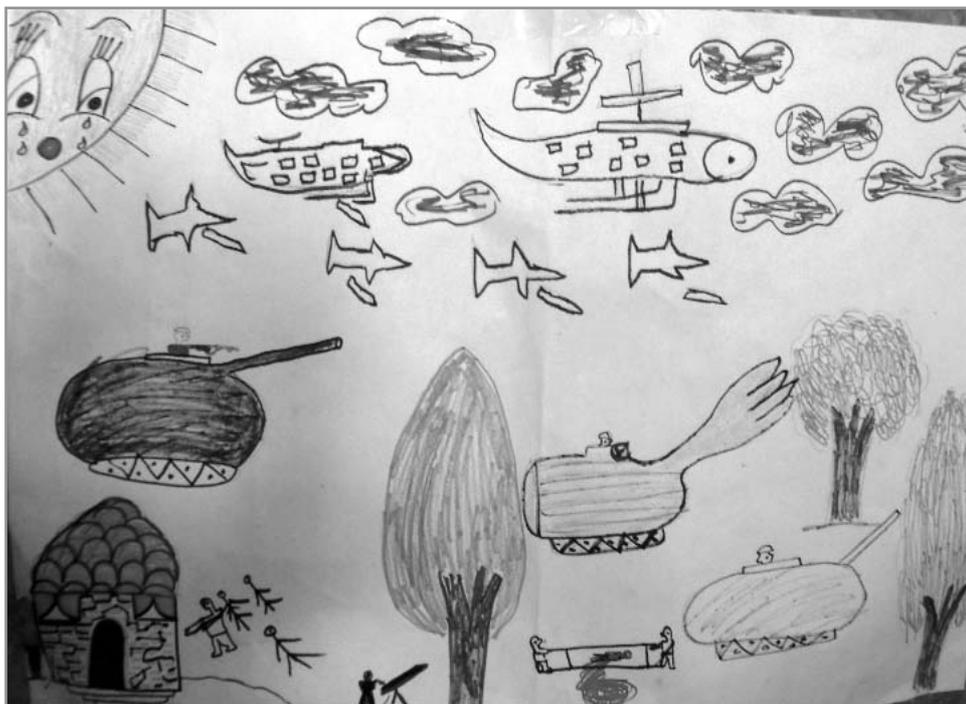
Emotional reactions to stress are often accompanied by:

- muscle aches and pains
- diarrhoea
- irregular heartbeats
- headaches
- feelings of panic and fear
- depression
- consuming too much alcohol
- using drugs (including painkillers).

Additional circumstances that make PTSD worse, which can lead to complex PTSD are those that:

- are sudden and unexpected
- go on for a long time
- the person is trapped and can't get away
- are man-made
- cause many deaths cause mutilation and loss of arms or legs
- involve children.

(*Royal College Psychiatrists, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*)



Children's drawing

These indicators are widely experienced by people living in the Occupied Territories and in Israel in range of rocket fire from Gaza. According to Israeli figures in 2008, there were over 3,000 rocket and mortar attacks fired from Gaza, directed at Israel. Between June 2004 and January 2010, twenty-six people were killed in Israel, including six Palestinians, two young people and two Israeli soldiers; frequent rocket and mortar fire had a deleterious psychological effect on the population in areas within 25 mile range of the Gaza-Israeli border. (B'Tselem)

### A psychosocial approach

The benefits of strong community support, following research in Israeli kibbutz and the Occupied Territories, were found to be essential for mental well-being and sustained therapeutic work to take place (Hazut 2005, Ziv and Israeli 1977, Punamaki 1988, Sway, Nashashibi, Salah & Shweiki 2005). In Gaza, staff talked of the cultural obstacles in treating mental ill health: 'Some would rather admit to being possessed by a devil than to having a mental illness.'

At the Palestine Trauma Centre, Community Based Intervention (CBI) is used in which the parents and children are involved in the programme. This social based inclusive approach broadens the support structures involved in the child's welfare, which includes schools, hospitals, cr ches, family relations, social workers and aid support workers, and creates a stronger base to work from, adding resilience in times of crisis and greater chances for effective therapy.

### Difficulty in maintaining anchorage and a secure space for therapy

Within the outreach programme run by the PTC, sessions are run on average for two hours, three days a week over six months. Previous programmes have been disrupted by military incursions which shatter the sustainability and continuity of therapy work and programme planning and feasibility. (Kalmanowitz and Lloyd 2005).



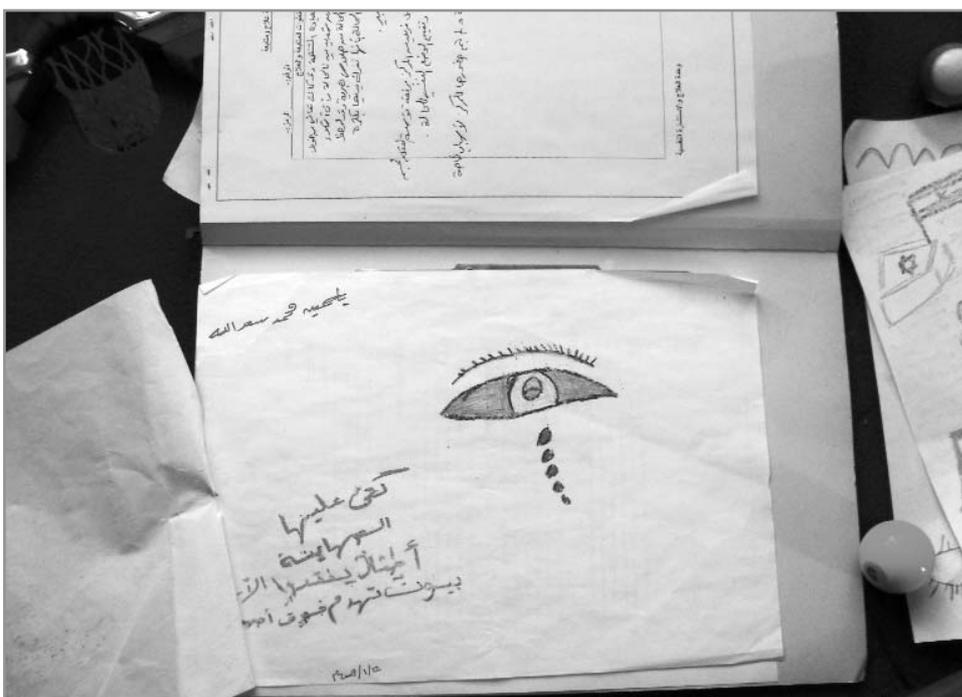
Peter with members of the Palestine Trauma Centre for Victims' Welfare (PTC)

The provision of a stable environment in order that psychological healing can take place is drastically affected by these conditions; the protective shield or anchor necessary to support the healing process is severely undermined. (Hazut 2005)

Ideological beliefs can help to sustain people within a conflict situation but can

also cause entrenchment, contributing to the continuation of conflict and the conditions that are maintaining the trauma. (Punamaki 1988)

Graduated levels of disclosure (Cox 1988) are severely limited if, for example, underlying mental health conditions require more sustained and intensive work.



Psychologist's notes, 11 year old girl, PTC Gaza. Translation: 'Stop destroying our homes and lives'.

# GAZA: politics, art and therapy

The trauma of war - a normal reaction to abnormal circumstances (*Royal College of Psychiatrists*) - is being worked with, which being man-made is more mentally debilitating, the symptoms of which may mask more profound psychosis or mental disturbance. 'Direct experience of natural disasters can be profoundly traumatic for children, but the added element of deliberately engineered humanitarian catastrophe inherent in armed conflict can damage a child's fundamental faith in humanity.' (*Violence and Young Minds 1994*).

## Palestine Trauma Centre Proposal

Later on the day of the march, 31 December, I met staff from the PTC and we planned a programme including visiting the Centre, including my delivery of a training session and fulfilling an art project with Palestinian children, to take place over the following days. Consequently I postponed my flight home from Cairo.

In the training session I proposed to share experience and methodology in an exchange of ideas and practice. I intended to observe and record the staff's methods and obtain support and advice by exploring training possibilities for them on my return to the UK, so that valuable practice could be shared.

I outlined an art project: to work with a group comprising children and staff in a devastated area, to build a cairn-like shape or structure. This could initially represent a tomb or burial mound but also by placing piece upon piece of broken concrete it would gradually become a structure in both a metaphorical and actual sense: a symbolic act of reconstruction amidst the rubble. I took my inspiration from artists who had worked through the devastation of previous wars.



*According to B'Tselem, the Israeli Centre for Human Rights, 80% of water wells were not fully functioning following Operation Cast Lead, others had ceased operation.*

*'One can shout out through refuse, and this is what I did....it was a prayer about the victorious end of the war, victorious as once again peace had won in the end. Everything had broken down in any case and new things had to be made out of fragments and this is*

*Merz. It was like an image of the revolution within me, not as it was but as it should have been.'*  
(Schwitters 1919)

My plan was to photograph and record this process, make a video and publish it on the internet so



*A painting project by UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) in Gaza city engaging children to paint the school walls*

that it could be universally shared as a record of the work there, especially for the children who could view this in Gaza.

I returned to the hotel in the evening after discussing these proposals to be informed that Hamas had given instructions for us to leave at 9 o'clock in the morning on the next day. Border security was being increased because of the imminent arrival of the Viva Palestina convoy and clashes were expected.

Confusion, anger and outrage ensued as arrangements had to be cancelled and we argued to stay. Some vowed that they would hide rather than leave. After receiving an extension of six hours from Hamas because of my connections with the PTC, I was taken to the Centre where I presented the welcoming staff with the donations and the suitcase of art materials for the therapy work. During the hours before departure we travelled north through areas of the most frequent incursions. Amongst the devastation materials were being reclaimed in anticipation of a lift on the embargo. On makeshift benches, twisted steel reinforcement rods were being straightened by hand, ready for re-use. Because of fuel shortages transport was predominantly by donkey and cart, although cars were frequently in evidence. I was told that in some places, due to lack of imported building supplies, larger pieces of concrete were being used in combination with pulverised rubble and mud to make a rudimentary mortar as a substitute bonding material.

We visited an outreach venue set up in a gutted building with plastic sheeting covering the walls, pock-marked by bullets and shrapnel. Calming music was playing. Working within war damaged buildings provides the opportunity for children and families to re-frame their traumatic experiences within the context of the buildings in which the experiences took place.



*Art project at PTC Outreach, Gaza*

The children were of mixed gender aged from around six to nine years' old, supported by a female therapist and were sitting around the edge of a large circular piece of coloured fabric. They were encouraged to draw their experiences which they did with felt tips. Then, each in turn stood up and shared these with the group and then described the event depicted in the work. Upon completion they were applauded as a positive reinforcement and then resumed sitting within the circle. Each child was given an opportunity to describe their experience.

At the conclusion of the art making session the children took up the circular cloth, moved around in a circle and then moved from the perimeter towards the centre, facilitating physical closeness, sharedness and mutuality. We then visited a home which had been hit by a phosphorus bomb attack. One year after the attack the building was still a blackened shell; some of the scorched plaster had been stripped off and electrical cables dangled from the ceiling. The owner and his family were living upstairs with another family under plastic sheets.

Here the children were singing and chanting, sitting cross legged in one

room at the rear of the house whilst the owner, now with no work and no home, recounted the experience of protecting his family during the phosphorus attack. The emphasis of the PTC is on resilience and 'empowerment'. However the protracted nature of the violence, lack of security and physical deprivation in this situation can only deepen the development of more chronic psychological problems or fuel the conditions for armed retaliation, which can be seen as a normal reaction given the circumstances.

What the aid workers on the Mavi Marmara and Gaza flotilla were trying to demonstrate (and the Gaza Freedom March participants) was that the victims of conflict in the Occupied Territories need not only aid (which defines them as dependent victims) but also a recognition of their fundamental human rights and a political initiative on the part of the 'international community' to end the cycle of violence so that peace and security can be restored to the region.

**Peter Offord is currently registered as an Art Therapist with the Meningitis Trust. He was elected as a Green Party City Councillor for Norwich in 2008.**

# GAZA: politics, art and therapy

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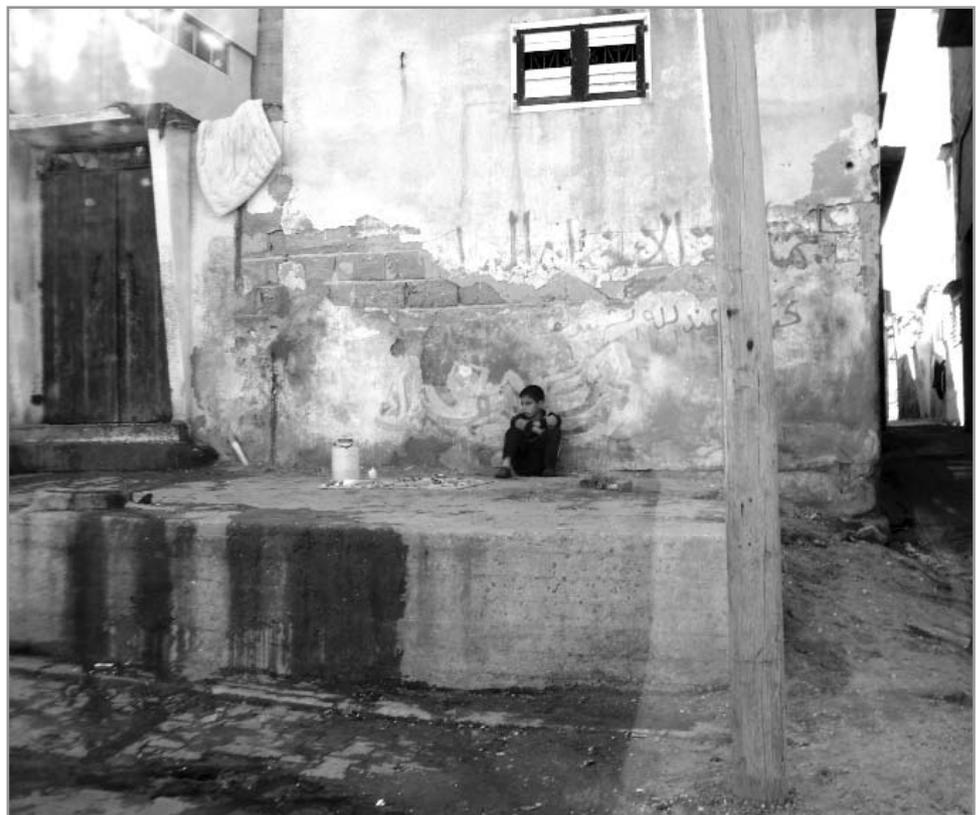


Child's picture

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Small boy in Gaza



*Waiting for the ferry in Gaza Port*

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Peter is available to give talks on his experience with a video and slide show.

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