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Um Hussein, a Gazan grandmother, sits alone. Pictures of smiling faces, seemingly elevated in clouds and daisies, look down from the walls of her room.

On a hot July afternoon, in the early days of Gaza's last war, her elderly husband took seven of their grandchildren up on to the roof, to 'relax and get some sunlight'. They had spent several days cooped up in the house as the Israeli bombs hit Gaza, but the military had announced a brief truce. According to the report by Defense Child International (DCI), they were still on the roof when two artillery shells struck. All were killed immediately except for nine year old Ola, who died of her injuries in hospital five hours later.

Ambulances, firefighters, neighbours and journalists rushed to the house. Then in an apparent 'double tap', two more artillery shells were sent into the crowd. Among the dead were two more of Um Hussein's family, and another son badly injured.

A plaque on the battered concrete walls of the four-storey al-Silk family house, where the generations live on different floors, commemorates the ten casualties of that day, aged two to sixty nine.

“I am not the only one suffering tragedy,” says Um Hussein, “Many people are suffering.”

Operation Protective Edge, launched on 5 July 2014, with the stated aim of halting rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel, killed at least 1,492 civilians, a third of them children. Also killed were five Israeli civilians (including one four year old killed by a Palestinian mortar shell which landed on his home in southern Israel) and 67 Israeli soldiers, according to the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and Betselem, an Israeli human rights organization.

In the aftermath of the war, some 370,000 Gazan children were left suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) according to UNICEF. In the immediate wake of the bombing, teams from Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP) visited all those who had lost multiple family members. “We use play therapy, psycho-drama and family counselling to help children with severe PTSD,” explained Dr Taysir Diab, a senior psychiatrist.

GCMHP is in the front line of training and providing mental health practitioners throughout schools and clinics. “Our two year diploma in community mental health is now extended to nurses, social workers, even occupational therapists and physiotherapists. We run after- school sessions to train teachers and counsellors,” adds Dr Diab.

Psycho-drama, alongside other psycho-social initiatives, was introduced two years ago.

“Children from 3 to 11 love to play stories,” says Ines, a slight figure, quietly spoken, who runs psycho-drama sessions in schools. She explains:

“.....they are in a kingdom with a king and a queen and in their kingdom there is a plant. And this plant can heal all diseases - in Gaza especially we have difficult diseases, like cancer and we do not have therapy for this - and we have invaders who want to take this flower, so we want to protect it. This is their own story,” Ines says. “We do a role play and each child chooses his or her role and they give us, the therapists, our role and they say to me, ‘You will be the flower,’ and to my colleague ‘You will be the invader.’ So they learn from this story how they lead a team to protect their land or their goal and they are not using aggressive behaviour.”

At the Palestine Trauma Centre (PTC) in Gaza City, Dr Ghada Rhadwan and her team use teddy bears. Questions focus on the teddy: ‘What does he say? How are you going to look after him?’ “It is important for the traumatised child to feel that intense attention is not directed towards him, and that discussion occurs in an open space....

“Mohammed, age 12, tried to bury his teddy bear in the sand. The child’s father was a fisherman and he was shot in his boat. So he imagines this teddy bear is his own father and he can bury him in the ground,” she explains.



Role-play also reveals the inter-generational aspect of PTSD.

“We gave an old man of 76 a teddy bear, and he started to remember 1948. He remembered digging a hole and putting his sister and mother in that hole to try and keep them safe. He

remembered his little sister saying 'Why are we in this hole? Is this our grave?' That was such a painful moment he has never been able to forget it. This touched me particularly because this old man was my uncle and his little sister was my mother," says Ghada.

Central to work done by PTC(Gaza) are 'Focusing' sessions, which are run in groups, and adapted for both adults and children. Ghada explains the basic techniques of Focusing: the importance of 'deep listening' for both therapist and patient. Self-understanding creates a space for healing. Patients are taught to develop a 'felt sense' of their pain, to accept it and 'dialogue with it'. "In our culture we try to deny those feelings of pain," she explains. "If you deny them, finally you will have a breakdown, you won't be resilient anymore."

Resilience is a word much used in the context of Gaza and the Gazans. At PTC therapists use a green olive branch and a dry stick, to symbolise the choice between life and hope and wood which is brittle and breaks under pressure." Patients choose one or the other to discuss their feelings.

The simple exercise perhaps underlines the singularity of Gazan trauma. Mental health workers all agree that trauma in Gaza is not truly 'PTSD,' since it cannot be described as 'post.' It is continuous.

"A ten year old child has witnessed 3 major wars in his life, in 2009, 2012 and 2014. He knows nothing except for war: bombing..... dead bodies..... destroyed houses, these are the images in children's minds," says Husam al Nouno at GCMHP. "We sit with children, we help them and they improve, but we know we are preparing them for a new trauma. Our colleagues worldwide do not have this fear. The continuous threat of a new attack affects our work,"

Behind the expectation of another war, lies also the knowledge that successive wars have increased in ferocity. Casualty figures for Operation Cast Lead, the 2009 military offensive, record 352 children killed, resulting in the UN Fact Finding Mission known as the 'Goldstone Report.' The Commission, led by Judge Richard Goldstone, recommended that both sides should be investigated for possible war crimes. Western governments buried the report.

The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) refers to these repeated attacks as 'mowing the lawn.'

The 2014 attack showed a vast increase in both fire power and casualties. 7,000 shells were fired into the neighbourhood of Shuj'iayya, where the al Silk family lived, in one 24 hour period, according to a Pentagon summary report, allegedly provoking the comment from one of John Kerry's military advisors, 'not so much mowing the lawn as removing the topsoil'.

The sum of tonnages dropped or fired during Protective Edge was greater by a factor of ten when compared with the tonnages dropped during Cast Lead, according to Col. Desmond Travers, the military member of the Goldstone Commission. Also, 'a greater disproportion of the victims were non-combatants, especially among women and children,' he said.

The attacks on residential areas and civilian structures during Protective Edge raised critical concerns that Israeli forces committed war crimes.



164 children were killed in drone attacks, according to the recent Defense Child International Palestine (DCIP) report, *'Operation Protective Edge: a War Waged on Gaza's Children,'* which gives evidence suggesting that children were directly targeted. Rawya Joudeh and four of her five children aged between 6 and 14 were killed by a drone fired missile as they played together in the family's yard in Jabaliya refugee camp, North Gaza. A similar missile killed Abdel-Rahman Bassam Khattab aged 5 as he played alone on the rooftop of his family's home in Deir al-Balah, central Gaza. DCIP's investigation determined that Abdel-Rahman would have been clearly seen from the air as he played on the roof. 18 children from the Abu Jami family were killed when an Israeli warplane destroyed their home as they sat down for dinner.

A missile attack on a school in Rafah, south Gaza, sheltering 3,000 displaced civilians, was denounced as a 'gross violation of international human rights law' by UN secretary-general Ban Ki Moon, who confirmed that the IDF had been repeatedly warned of the location of such sites.

The recent military aid deal, before Obama left office, between the US and Israel is worth a total of 38 billion USD over ten years, beginning in budget year 2019, according to Al Jazeera. Analysts say munitions on Israel's shopping list may well be used in future assaults on the Gaza Strip.

For many, experience does not favour the green olive branch. "People in Gaza feel they are not far from another attack, because nothing changes," says Dr Mohamed Altawil from PTC. Many would echo Hazim Shawwa, a man known throughout the Gaza Strip for his work with amputees: "The closure is very hard today. Gaza is like a big brazier with a very high heat coming inside the hearts of the people. Life in Gaza is miserable; they cannot bear this anymore. We are waiting for what? There is no peace, no process for peace, the world is just a big machine for killing."
