

Fact Sheet 4: The Children of the Middle East: Innocents Trapped in a Conflict

"The child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity."

Principle 2, Declaration of the Rights of the Child - UN General Assembly resolution 1386 (XIV), 20 November 1959

Background

The conditions of both Palestinian and Israeli children have deteriorated sharply in the last two years, as a result of the Palestinian Intifada and the escalation of violence and terror attacks. In addition to the pain and suffering of children on both sides, there is also concern about the long term psychological damage that may result from the trauma of witnessing violence either first hand or as a result of a family or loved one's involvement.

Because of the innate importance of children to the future of the Middle East, The Prism Group undertook an extensive study to examine the impact two years of violence has had on the children of the Middle East. While the study will be released shortly, this Fact Sheet presents an overview of some of our findings, including:

- ❑ Children Growing up with Violence (see Fact Sheet #3 and # 9)
- ❑ Circumstances Surrounding the Deaths and Injuries to Children
- ❑ The Exploitation of Children for Political Gain
- ❑ Intentional Targeting of Children

Children Growing Up With Violence

The International Covenant of Children's Rights condemns the recruitment of children under age 18 in armed conflicts. Yet contrary to this basic tenet, Palestinian children are deliberately being raised in a culture of violence and hate. The instances of proof are many and varied. Following are but a few examples:

- ❑ The BBC has videotaped Islamic Jihad-sponsored summer camps where children as young as eight receive paramilitary training. In contravention of normal humane standards, children are taught that after a person becomes a suicide bomber, he reaches the highest level of paradise. Such ingrained hatred leads to the glorification of violence and martyrdom, and the willingness to kill others for the perceived benefit of spiritual immortality. Children of a very young age, and even babies, have been dressed and photographed as suicide bombers by their parents.
- ❑ Abu Mazen, a senior official within the Palestinian Authority, admitted that children have been paid approximately \$1 for every pipe bomb they throw. According to Abu Mazen, at least 40 children have lost arms when throwing these bombs. (Alzamim [a Kuwati newspaper] June 20, 2002)
- ❑ Incitement to violence is rife throughout the Palestinian Authority school system. School textbooks encourage hatred and extol "martyrdom". Signs are posted on the walls of kindergartens praising their students as "the shaheeds [martyrs] of tomorrow". Elementary school teachers and principals commend students for wanting to "tear their [Zionists'] bodies into little pieces and cause them more pain than they will ever know."

How can this be considered acceptable, a society that encourages its children to die? The Palestinian leadership must be brought to account.

Circumstances Surrounding the Deaths and Injury to Children

A study of the circumstances surrounding the deaths and injury of Palestinian and Israeli children shows that the settings in which these deaths and/or injuries took place differ extensively. It cannot be ignored that there have been scattered instances of Palestinian children killed as innocent bystanders. And yet, the vast majority of Palestinian children have been tragically killed during confrontations with the IDF. Exact numbers are unavailable, but educated estimates set the number of killed in this manner at around 200.

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How did these children come to be exposed to danger? Why are Palestinian children allowed to confront a military force? Why are they present among rioters, snipers, and terrorists? And how is the press always in "the right place at the right time" to photograph such acts of false heroism? Unfortunately, these very reasonable questions have not as yet been answered – neither by the Palestinian Authority nor by the families of the victims themselves.

Exploitation of Children for Political Gain

The cynical use of children extends to many other spheres. There is mounting evidence that Palestinian children have been exploited by elements within the Palestinian leadership, in order to manipulate media images, deliberately being sent to the front lines of the conflict. For example, there is documented television footage revealing that Palestinian snipers have repeatedly used children as human shields when shooting at the IDF. By contrast, Israeli soldiers have standing orders not to shoot live ammunition at children.

Cash incentives have been provided to the parents of children wounded or killed as "martyrs."

- ❑ Iraq's Saddam Hussein increased his financial pledge to Palestinian families of suicide bombers from \$10,000 to \$25,000. (Associated Press, April 3,2002)
- ❑ A quasi-governmental committee in Saudi Arabia last year pledged \$5,333 to "each family that has suffered from martyrdom." (The Washington Post, April 9,2002)
- ❑ Payment authorisation for ceremonies honouring suicide bombers, as well as money to support families of the suicide bombers, have been found signed by the chairman of the Palestinian authority. (The Washington Post, April 3,2002;MSNBC, April 3,2002)

This is coupled to a social approval so powerful that when 15-year-old Ahmat Omar Abu Selmia was killed on his way to attack the Israeli community of Dugit, his father celebrated his "martyrdom" at a street festival attended by about 200 men.

Intentional Targeting of Children

Hundreds of Israeli children have been killed or maimed since September 27, 2000. In many cases, these children were merely engaging in everyday activities, such as riding in a bus to school, eating at a restaurant with their parents, playing in a kindergarten or simply queuing to enter a discotheque on the weekend. A more comprehensive list is available in The Prism Groups extensive study on The Children of the Intifada.

What links these incidents is that the targets were picked as "soft" and unprotected. Nothing can justify these acts of violence, which strike at the core of reasonable Western values.

Conclusion

The most vulnerable and valuable segment of any society is its children; every effort should be made to afford them the protection promised in the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of the Child. The Palestinian educational system is in urgent need of reform in order to break the endless cycle of hatred. The exploitation of Palestinian children on the battlefield must be stopped.

It is vital that all children, both Palestinian and Israeli, grow up free of violence and hate. This is the key to a true and lasting peace in the future.

The Prism Group is a non-governmental organization, founded in 2002 to help clarify issues dealing with the Middle East. The Prism Group is dedicated to presenting a spectrum of viewpoints, promoting a better understanding of the political and social realities in the region.

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