Mental health in the Occupied Territories

The country where the future does not exist.

On the map of the world Palestine remains a permanent question mark: the absence of any political solution pushes civil societies to bring a certain amount of hope to the inhabitants of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, a population whose mental health is threatened, for whom the past, the present and the future are marked by violence and humiliation.

The cradle of our civilization, Palestine is a region where the reality of the situation is often misunderstood, creating fear. This land that divides or brings together does not leave anyone untouched.

For decades now, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has regularly shown up in the international news; its intensity, its length, its injustice and its implications for international politics make of it «The greatest moral issue of our time», said Nelson Mandela.

Historical elements

In 1947, soon after its creation, the General Assembly of the UN accepts the partition of Palestine into a Jewish State and an Arab state, giving Jerusalem a special international status under the administrative authority of the UN\(^1\). The Arabs, who represent more than 1,3 million of inhabitants, obtain 44% of the Territories, and ±500'000 Jews receive the majority of the area\(^2\). This unequal partition is rejected by the Arabs but accepted by the Jewish Agency, although the latter is not satisfied by the territory limits implied for the proposed Jewish State\(^1\).

On May 14th 1948 the Jewish Agency proclaims the creation of the State of Israel on the territory that it was allocated and immediately violent clashes erupt.

The first Israeli-Arab war follows, in which Israel occupies a big part of the territories that had been allocated to the Arab State, including West-Jerusalem\(^1\). Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West bank of the Jordan river end up under Egyptian and Jordanian administration. Over 500 villages are destroyed and 750'000 Palestinians are uprooted from their land, becoming refugees; it is known among the Arabs as the Nakba, the Catastrophe.

64 years later, UN resolution 194 of December 11, 1948 assuring the right of return for the refugees has still not been implemented, and they are still waiting

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\(^2\) [http://www.info-palestine.net/article.php3?id_article=7767](http://www.info-palestine.net/article.php3?id_article=7767)
to return to their land. Palestinians still live under occupation, the people of Gaza are under siege, as a 700 km wall rips apart the land and reduced their territory, while the Jewish settlements expand every day. Basic rights of Palestinians are violated on a daily basis, discrimination affects every aspect of life, from access to water\(^3\) to the building of houses, or the right to live in a certain area\(^4\), as well as access to health and freedom of movement\(^5\)...

**Civil society concerned**

Although Israel's right to exist is recognised by the majority of countries as well as the Palestinians, the right to exist of the latter is continually questioned. The Palestinian people, forgotten by the international community and its institutions, called on the civil societies of the world to support its non-violent resistance against occupation. People from different backgrounds, joined together by the same spirit of solidarity, are present in Palestine, and accompany Palestinians in the daily life of a people living under occupation. They walk by their side in demonstrations against the wall and settlements, accompany farmers to their fields to facilitate the crossing of checkpoints, are present to document and report the violations of human rights that make up every day life. The impact of this presence cannot be quantified and does definitely not convince everybody. Indeed, what can a invited grandmother impose as change by spending her summer in Hebron, armed with a camera and a smile? Or a foreign student spending his or her holidays harvesting olives at the lower part of a settlement? Every person coming back from Palestine brings back a story, a destiny linked to the occupation. These people pass on voices that were repressed for too long, they are the way of transmission of a suffering that consumes hope. They expose the injustice suffered by Palestinians, so that one day maybe, these can enjoy their freedom, a condition necessary for peace.

In February 2012, I joined the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) for a month; my first trip in 2009 had a profound impact on me, and convinced me that by defending other people's freedom, one defend ones own.

**Hebron or the city of Apartheid**

The notion of Apartheid is still very much a controversy when it comes to Israel. Nevertheless the definition of Apartheid by the Convention on the Suppression

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and Punishment of the crime of Apartheid corresponds to what is going on in Israel Palestine, and is extremely visible in Hebron: “include similar policies and practices of racial segregation and discrimination as practised in southern Africa” and “inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them.”

Hebron is one of the main Palestinian cities, and the only one in the Occupied Territories that has a population of Jewish settlers within its centre, mixed with the Palestinians. In 1997, three years after the massacre of the Ibrahimi mosque, where a settler opened fire on a praying crowd, the city was divided into two: H1, under Palestinian control, representing 80% of the city, and H2, under Israeli control, the remaining 20%. The couple of hundred settlers living in the heart of the city are protected by some 2'000 soldiers and a regime that B’tselem, an Israeli NGO, describes as: « intentionally and openly based on the "separation principle", the result of which is legal and physical segregation between the Israeli settlers and the Palestinian majority ». 

The freedom of movement of Palestinians is extremely limited by a large number of checkpoints. Access to certain streets is forbidden for Palestinians, on foot or by car, and is reserved for the use of the army and settlers only. This policy of separation caused the shutting down of many shops by the army, and destroyed the local economy pushing many inhabitants to leave. Violence from soldiers or settlers on the local population happens on a daily basis, and often remains unpunished.

Impact on mental health

The situation of the city has a huge impact on the population's mental health, as everyday activities are conditioned by occupation. The story of the S family represents the reality of life in this area.

The family has been living for 4 years in a houses situated between two checkpoints, next to a settlement. The army set up a watchtower on their roof, that they cannot access, not even for maintenance, and a wall in front of their house. Settlers come on their roof every week, they dance and pray, and sometimes they urinate on the house or throw stones at the kids. The army and the Israeli police usually do not intervene, and the family is on its own to face these assaults.

The father is a volunteer for B'tselem, and Israeli NGO that gives out video cameras to Palestinians, so that they can document the violation of their rights.

7 http://www.btselem.org/hebron
and the violence they face. The parents are determined not to leave their house, but they worry about their kids. A settler threw a stone at the 14 year-old daughter on her way to school, about a year ago, breaking her jaw. Their other younger daughter, was assaulted by a settler who set her hair on fire, and their 13 year-old son was pushed into barbed wire by the soldiers. Every victim reacts differently. The younger daughter became introvert and anxious, whereas the older one takes part in the work of B'tselem, armed with a video camera. She says she wants to resist until the settlers and the army leave. The parents are victims as well. A few days before our visit, soldiers came to get the father around 10pm, they beat and detained him at the checkpoint, for no reason.

**Sadness, fear, resignation**

A UN report on the health situation in the Occupied Territories gives alarming numbers. Up to 96% of citizens are affected by a state of sadness; among children 51% do not feel any more like taking part in an activity, 61% show signs of fear, 43% have sleeping problems, and 63% suffer from anxiety.8

Life in Hebron can be compared to that of a person affected by domestic violence living with his or her abuser. It is ruled by incidents involving the army or settlers, causing a permanent tension amongst the population. These incidents vary in nature: arbitrary detention at the checkpoint, night patrols where soldiers enter houses and damage personal property, arbitrary arrests of adults or children, restriction of freedom of movement, physical violence, provocation of religious nature (soldiers imitating the call to prayer at the checkpoint or entering mosques9). These violent incidents all have the same goal: « to sow fear. Make everyone know that the army can appear at any moment.»

**Breaking the silence**

Occupation has a disastrous impact on the mental health of an unarmed civilian population, but also on its own soldiers. Military service is compulsory in Israel. Some youths find the courage to go against their society and refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories, but the majority does not seem to question the importance of serving the occupation in person. Young men and women end up in Hebron, or elsewhere, in a reality they had never imagined, and that scars them for life.

These youths have huge power. Armed with machine guns, they have, so to say, carte blanche, i.e free range, to control the daily life of a population that has

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9 [http://www.cpt.org/underattack](http://www.cpt.org/underattack)
10 Breaking the Silence, Soldier’s Testimonies From Hebron, 2005-2007
always been described to them as being the enemy, dehumanised and demonized.

Breaking the Silence is an organisation of ex-combatants who served in the Occupied Territories since the start of the second Intifada. They testify about the reality of military life in the Territories to expose to the entire Israeli society the human cost of occupation, for Israelis as well as for Palestinians.

**Loss of empathy**

In Hebron, stuck between a civil population who despises them, and a population of Jewish settlers who do not respect them and charged with mission more than questionable, the young soldiers describe a fast drift towards a violent and behaviour without affect: «It’s a crazy town, Hebron. At first, when I just came to the company, I mean I was this leftie kibbutznik, Hashomer Hatza’ir (leftist zionist movement), you learn that Arabs are human etc. Really I would fight with my mates after an arrest – we’d put the detainee in the jeep or patrol truck with us – and I’d fight with them not to beat him up. It makes you sort of apathetic eventually: beat him, don’t beat him, what do I care. I don’t do anything. I don’t beat anyone. So go ahead and bang his head up ».

Many soldiers describe a loss of empathy for the other, the Palestinian, and find themselves committing acts that they never thought they would be able to do, like pointing their gun at a child, searching houses at night-time, stealing personal belongings in these houses, looting shops, hitting someone... They develop a way of survival to be able to face the reality of military service, and another one to be able to go home, in a normal life: «you have to put your feelings on ‘pause’, like on your sound system, some two-three weeks, and then you’re on the bus back, and press ‘play’ again and start rolling. Suddenly you can love and even be much softer towards people ».

Eaten by guilt, many do not dare talking about their combat experience, but have to live with the reality of their deeds...

**Balata camp**

In Balata refugee camp, in Nablus, the situation is nearly worse. 25'000 people are piled up on 1 square km, in a maze of cement buildings hardly wide enough to let an adult man pass through at some areas. Here, promiscuity is the norm; houses are damp and dark, and without privacy. 46% of the population of the camp is unemployed, and 65% is under 18 years.
The problem of the refugees is inextricable, but is one of the key elements for the resolution of the conflict. In 1948, during the first Israeli-Arab war, about 800'000 Palestinians became refugees. They are now several millions, packed up in camps in Palestine and the surrounding countries, waiting for the implementation of their right to return, according to UN resolution 194. Several generations after the Nakba, their identity remains extremely strong. A child born in a camp will give as place of origin the name of a village that often does not exist any more, and most families still have the keys to the 1948 houses, where Israeli families now live, or that were destroyed…

The social, economical and psychological situation is worsening in Balata camp. The local economy was destroyed by occupation, the lack/absence of work and the frustration of seeing no end to occupation is creating social problems that are new to Palestinian society and attack its structure. Domestic violence/violence to women is exploding, youths getting out of Israeli jails end up without qualification, without perspective/project for the future, becoming easy preys for extremist movements. Drug and alcohol abuse is increasing, as well as the suicide rate.

No perspective

A social, worker of the camp gives an alarming report about the inhabitants’ mental health. According to him, life is harder now than ever before. The lack of political process, the expansion of settlements in the area and the improbability to see some day a Palestinian state cause a frustration that is getting harder to control.

Many people cannot project themselves/imagine in the future, life is on hold…the resilience of many Palestinians reached its limits. He mentions an incident illustrating daily life, a story amongst so many.

In March, three young Palestinians, aged about 14 tried to break into a settlement. They knew this would be considered a terrorist act, and that they would get shot, but in a society where suicide is forbidden by religion, they imagined that dying as martyrs was a dignified way to kill themselves, and free themselves from an unbearable present and an inexistent future. None of them was injured, but they were arrested… As the social worker said : « When you have no life, no prospect for life, this is what you get ».

Tulkarem or the right to health

In Tulkarem, North-West of West Bank, the health of the Palestinian population is affected by occupation in another way, a complex of chemical factories.
Once upon a time, the city was rich, today it is dying, strangled by the separation wall and asphyxiated by the toxic fumes.

The complex was originally in Israel, in Netanya (12 km from Tulkarem). In 1984 it was moved to Tulkarem after a court decision stated that it was dangerous for the health of surrounding inhabitants. It is now in Occupied Territories, resting against the wall and built on confiscated land. As it is in occupied territory, it avoids Israeli law for the protection of the environment and the protection of workers, and can freely pollute surrounding agricultural land. This industrial zone produces pesticides, insecticides, and fertilisers, and the sickening fumes cause cancers and respiratory diseases...here, even the wind contributes to discriminate Palestinians. When it blows toward West Bank the factories work, but when it goes towards Israel, the machines stop...

To exist is to resist

Contrary to the convictions of many people, resistance in Palestine is mainly non-violent. It shows in every day activities, that go on no matter what: travelling in spite of checkpoints, sending the children to school, living beside a factory that ruins one’s health, rebuilding houses that were demolished by the army, replanting uprooted trees, and above anything else, believing in one’s humanity and rights, in spite of oppression and discrimination.

The Palestinian cause is the cause of justice and equality. It goes past territorial, political or religious borders because it questions humanity in every one of us. Israel and Palestine embody the difficulties to live together and build a different world, integrating the other in its difference rather than excluding and crushing them. Everybody has the possibility, maybe even the duty to fight against injustice, wherever it is, to create a better world. As a wise man said: « What scares me are not the actions and the cries of the poor people, but the indifference and silence of good people. »


12 Martin Luther King