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Occupied Families: A Study of Palestinian Families Living Under Israeli Occupation

Maha Mohammad Ayesh

University of Tennessee - Knoxville
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If the Honors Program staff needs to contact the student at any time, they may do so by phone at (865) 584-1270, e-mail (mayesh@utk), or at her home address (208 Golf Club Rd, Knoxville, TN 37919). They may also contact Dr. George White in the History department at (865) 974 9866.

[Signature]

George White, Jr.

[Signature]

Maha Ayesh

12-9-02

[Signature]

student signature

12-9-02

date
OCCUPIED FAMILIES:

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Senior Honors Thesis

By Maha Ayesh
In the United States... [t]he Palestinian is either a faceless refugee or a terrorist. I'm frequently struck by the extent to which this picture results not only from ignorance but also from avoidance of the Palestinian as a human being. The Palestinians and their lives and their styles, their ambitions and their achievements, go on despite the handful of incidents that causes the West to see them as a terrorist community.1

In late September 2002, Arjan El Fassed noted that American media reports commenting on the anniversary of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the second popular uprising of Palestinians against Israeli occupation, focused only on “suicide bombers and incursions.”2 This is not terribly surprising to those of us in the West, who are accustomed to hearing about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict only in terms of terrorist attacks and Israeli military activity. However, to someone living in occupied Palestine like El Fassed, such reporting is seen as absurd and negligent, for it ignores the daily experiences of life under occupation—the experiences of the men, women, and children whose existence is shaped by the realities of occupation.

To counter such careless reporting, El Fassed joined with other concerned activists to establish The Electronic Intifada. This online information portal describes and explains Israeli occupation and the intifada from a Palestinian perspective, a perspective that has generally been overlooked by mainstream America. A key feature of the website has been the Electronic Intifada Diaries—or, the Live from Palestine diaries—which feature daily reports from international peace activists, journalists, and ordinary Palestinians working and living in the Occupied Territories. Through eyewitness accounts, personal reflections, and interaction with the occupied society, these diaries provide insight to what life is like for Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.

However, it is not only the lives of individuals that are affected by an occupation such as that carried out by Israel in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The way a society functions and the way relationships operate are also transformed in response to the conditions of occupation. The most fundamental set of relationships in Palestinian society, as with virtually all societies, is that of the family. So while we may seldom hear of a political conflict in terms of a father’s anguish, a mother’s worries, or a child’s fears, it is important to understand and acknowledge the fact that long-standing and violent military occupation is not merely about political actions and responses. Rather, occupation, as seen in the case of the Palestinians, can and does affect the ability to fulfill social roles such as mother, father, and sibling, and perhaps most importantly, it has drastic effects on the development and upbringing of children.

Nevertheless, little research has been devoted to studying how occupation affects Palestinian family life. Most commentaries on the subject that do exist tend to focus on the emerging role of women in Palestinian society, and it is very rare to find more extensive examinations of the family as a whole, how familial relationships—such as that between parent and child—are affected by the occupation, or how families and children respond to the occupation. The following pages, thus, will attempt to bring light to some of these issues. By citing the *Live from Palestine* diaries, along with some of the research that does currently exist, they will provide a very brief and general overview of family life in occupied Palestine and some of the ways that the occupation afflicts Palestinian families. They will then take a closer look at how families operate as mechanism for survival and resistance and what implications the occupation has on the social/psychological development of children. One of
the hopes contained herein is that more people in the West will come to see that Palestinian society is not merely the basin of suicide bombers we typically make it out to be.

**Context: The Occupation and the Intifada**

Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip began in June of 1967, after it seized the territories during the Six Day War. Since then, Israel has “steadily strengthened” its military occupation “through the expansion of Israeli settlement activities, the expropriation of land and water resources, the extension of Israeli law to [previously Arab-controlled] East Jerusalem and the adoption of increasingly repressive measures against the Palestinian civilian population.”³ As the Palestinian population continued to grow and their dissatisfaction with occupation continued to surface, Israel increasingly began to utilize what a 1992 UN report describes as an “iron fist” policy that has included the deportation of civilians, destruction of houses as a form of collective punishment, mass arrests, and “interference in the Palestinians’ system of education, economic, and social development.”⁴ Israeli occupation has thus created “a climate of violence” that has “affected all categories of civilians, including very young children, women and the elderly.”⁵

Tamar Mayer describes “land confiscation, military invasions of everyday life, daily harassment, curfews and arrests, shrinking employment opportunities and collective punishments” as “integral part[s] of the Israeli military occupation.”⁶ Mayer further explains that as the repressive policies of occupation increased, so too did Palestinian frustrations and

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⁴ Ibid, 9.
⁵ Ibid, 10.
nationalist desires. The Palestinian resistance culminated in the beginning of the first intifada in December 1987. In an attempt to quell dissent, Israel responded to the intifada with even more repressive measures, exposing the Palestinian population to "a staggering array of extreme political stressors, ranging from relentless punitive measures imposed on the occupants of the territories to the pervasive traumatic experiences of loss of life or limb, loss of freedom (e.g., imprisonment), and loss of property (e.g., demolition of houses)."7

The first intifada officially came to an end with the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. However, the road to peace was stunted by deadlocked negotiations and periods of increased violence and hostility. All the while, Israel continued with many of the policies that incited the first intifada, such as increasing settlement activity in the Occupied Territories and staking exclusivist claims to Jerusalem and its holy sites. Palestinians grew restless as they saw their dreams of self-government fading away, and in September 2000, another intifada was born. To many, the Al-Aqsa Intifada, as it is popularly known, demonstrates the failure of the peace process to improve Palestinian living conditions.8

As with the first uprising, the current intifada has been countered with increased repression and violence, and living conditions under the occupation have become as unbearable as ever. Despite the Oslo Accord's stated goal of increased Palestinian autonomy in the Occupied Territories, the occupation has dramatically deteriorated the economic, political, and social well-being of the areas, so much so that unemployment in the Occupied Territories tripled overnight with the start of the intifada9 and is now the highest it has ever been. As with the first intifada, a "leading factor causing economic hardships continues to be

9 Ibid, 17.
the increasing number of imprisoned, wounded, maimed, and detained or killed Palestinian males."

Moreover, policies of collective punishment such as house demolitions, extended curfews, and roadblocks, while contributing to the dismal economic condition of the areas, have also left thousands homeless, prevented children from receiving adequate nutrition (an August 2002 report shows that 13.2% of Palestinian children under-five suffer from emergency levels of chronic malnutrition\(^\text{11}\)), and interrupted the educational process for extended periods of time.

Furthermore, a fundamental aspect of Israel’s occupation, especially during the

\emph{intifada}, is constant physical confrontation between the Israeli Defense Forces and Palestinian civilians. These confrontations have increased recently, especially since March 2002, when Israel launched a full-scale military assault on Palestinian towns and villages, reoccupying many cities where troops had previously withdrawn under conditions of the Oslo process. A Palestinian grandmother recounts her experiences after the reoccupation of Ramallah; after seeking safety in her daughter’s home, she recounts: “We spent seven terrible days there, no electricity for much of the time, and no water for 7 whole days and night[s], as well as much shooting, bombing and invasion of offices and homes nearby, as well as the search of our home by the Israeli army.”\(^\text{12}\) Indeed, house-to-house searches and seizures have become an increasingly common feature of Israeli military rule.

Aside from direct physical violence that often leads to death or injury, perhaps the most difficult aspect of life under occupation is the military-enforced curfews of Palestinian towns and villages. During the first \emph{intifada}, curfew was imposed for an average of 22 hours

\(^{10}\) United Nations, 14.

\(^{11}\) “Malnutrition of Palestinian Children at the Hands of the Israeli Government” (August 14, 2002), http://www.miftah.org/display.cfm?DocId=958

per day. Since the start of the second uprising, the curfew regime has become even more severe. For instance, in the West Bank city of Nablus, from June 2002 to September of that same year, curfew was lifted temporarily only for a total of 70 hours.\textsuperscript{13} Sam Bahour, a Palestinian-American living in El-Bireh describes the curfew as such:

> When Israel applies a curfew upon Palestinians it is total, comprehensive and unannounced....This total closure is accomplished by Israeli jeeps, tanks and armored personnel carriers roaming the narrow Palestinian streets with loud speakers notifying all...to go home....If the closure takes place in midday, within a maximum of sixty minutes the city will turn into a ghost town. If the closure is announced during the early morning hours (5am-7am), as has increasingly been the case, the city never wakes up.\textsuperscript{14}

Curfew thus prevents people from going to work, prevents children from going to schools, and places the entire town under virtual house arrest.

**Family Stress under the Occupation**

By causing distress in the lives of individuals, the occupation no doubt also leads to distress among the families of those individuals. Vivian Khamis explains how constant exposure to political violence leads to a high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder among Palestinians (PTSD). In fact, she concludes that 35 percent of families subjected to political violence qualify as having a history of PTSD.\textsuperscript{15} This high rate can be attributed, according to Khamis, “to living under conditions of constant political oppression, overwhelming experiences of death and destruction, and excessive demands.”\textsuperscript{16} Those family

\textsuperscript{13} El Fassed, “Nablus: ‘I want to go to school’,” *Live From Palestine* (12 September 2002).
\textsuperscript{14} Sam Bahour, “The Violence of Curfew,” *Live From Palestine* (28 August 2002).
\textsuperscript{15} Khamis, 85.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 86.
members who experience PTSD in turn “often experience difficulties with involvement in specific tasks and routines of family life and marital adjustment.”17

However, the burden that occupation places on families goes beyond merely psychological maladjustment, as the very nature of the occupation often transforms and complicates family relationships. A pattern throughout the occupation has been the erosion of the father’s role as maintainer of the family. Traditionally in Palestinian society, the father’s most important task was ensuring the financial well-being of his family. However, this has become increasingly difficult as the economic condition of the Occupied Territories continues to plummet, as roadblocks and checkpoints prevent men from making it to their jobs in surrounding cities or across the Israeli border, and as curfews continue to keep all citizens confined to their homes.

Shirabe Yamada, a Japanese human rights activist living in Dheisheh refugee camp noticed one father who had become extremely depressed. The man’s wife explained, “This situation is very difficult for many men like him. There is nothing to do, and they feel useless when they want to be doing something for themselves and their families.”18 Thus, it is not only the inability to supply financial provision that had so lowered the morale of this man and many others. It is the realization that they are unable to do anything to improve their own lives and the lives of their family members, as the industrious Palestinian man has been forced to remain idle. This in turn increases the stress of women, who not only have to worry about keeping children out of harm’s way, but who also have to deal with the frustrations of their husbands and sons.

17 Ibid, 2.
Stress on women is also increased as a result of the absence of husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. Deportations and arrests on unspecified charges have been part of Israel's occupation policy at least since the mid-1980s. However, the mass detaining of men has become especially common since the most recent intifada. The diaries report how, on a number of occasions, soldiers enter cities and demand the surrender all males between the ages of 16 and 40, and sometimes even as young as 14 and as old as 55. These men and boys are then taken to an undisclosed location to be kept for an indefinite amount of time, leaving family members unaware of their whereabouts and well-being. El Fassed relates a typical story: "Ghadir, my cousin called me. She lives in Ramallah and called me to find out about the whereabouts of the brother of her flat mate. He has been missing since the afternoon and they were afraid that he was killed, injured, or arrested." In another instance, a Palestinian woman, a pharmacist and mother of three young daughters, had her business destroyed when the Israeli military attacked Ramallah. Her husband had given himself up when all the men of the city were rounded for detention. After ten days of detention without contact with his family, he returned home to discover that his wife had suffered a nervous breakdown and had been badly beaten.

Yet, detentions and arrests are not the only ways the occupation keeps family members isolated from one another. Military checkpoints and roadblocks set up between Palestinian towns effectively inhibit or prevent family members who live in different cities from seeing each other, even when curfew is lifted. Catherine Cook, an American human rights worker describes the separation from her friend Hanan: "10 miles separate us. In terms of occupation distance, she is two checkpoints away....[I]t doesn't matter whether she's ten

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19 El Fassed, "Back at the office," Live from Palestine (31 March 2002).
miles or 20 yards away, with a closed checkpoint between us the result is the same: I don’t see Hanan.” Cook further notes:

Everyone here has a Hanan. She might be your mother, sister, doctor, spiritual advisor, or work colleague. She could be your wife or newborn baby girl who has forgotten the sound of your voice or the sight of your face because you have been stuck on the other side of the checkpoint for so long. She might simply be a friend that has helped you stay sane in the midst of chaos, as she is for me. She could be any of these things.

Cook concludes by stating, “Not seeing Hanan today will not kill me or drive me insane. A lifetime of this would.”

Tension between family members has also increased as a result of the occupation, as Palestinians living under virtual house arrest during periods of curfew become increasingly agitated by their situation. Whereas typical days used to be spent with children at school and one or both parents working, during curfews families are shut away at home for days at a time. Thus, the fear and aggression of children are expressed inside the house, rather than on the streets or in games with friends. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that 50 percent of Palestinians live in households averaging seven people, usually in overcrowded condition. The agitation of children in such cramped conditions likewise agitates parents who already have a difficult time dealing with their own idleness. Consequently, marital disputes, sometimes even leading to divorce, are on the rise. El Fassed relates a story that exemplifies this point:

My aunt in Ramallah told me the story of one of her neighbours. During the curfew she was standing in her garden. An Israeli military jeep passed by and shouted to her: “Get inside or we [will] shoot and kill you.” She shouted back at them: “Well, you

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21 Catherine Cook, “The distance between Hanan and I,” Live from Palestine (10 June 2002).
22 Ibid.
24 www.pchrs.org, as found in: Sam Bahour, “The Violence of Curfew.”
better kill me here outside in my garden, because if I’m forced inside my home, I will kill my husband.”

Perhaps one of the most damaging effects of occupation on Palestinian families is the decrease of parental control and authority. As Usher noted during the first intifada, “Palestinian children have not only had to stand and watch their homes being destroyed; they have witnessed their mothers and sisters being insulted, their brothers being beaten, and their fathers—especially their fathers—being degraded and, on some occasions, killed.” Young children thus see their main image of security (their parents) shattered, and they begin to recognize the helplessness of the very people who are there to protect them. Sam Bahour recounts a rather typical story of his family’s house being raided by armed soldiers while his two young daughters watched. In another incident, a father is humiliated in front of his two children, as a soldier shouts at him while he approaches the gates of a checkpoint “in a tone of voice used for disobedient dogs.”

Furthermore, when such traumatic instances occur or when children’s lives are interrupted, and they told they cannot play outside or go to school, they often ask questions that their parents cannot answer. Ramzi, a father in Rafah does not allow his four-year-old son Iyad to play outside because of the severe danger and risk of children being killed or injured. Ramzi describes his frustration at being unable to respond to the inquiries of his son:

What am I suppose to say when Iyad asks me why he can’t play outside? What am I suppose to tell him when he asks me why there are people shooting guns at us? Why tanks roll into our neighborhoods and fire at anything moving? Why airplanes and tanks destroy our city buildings and his friends’ houses? What am I suppose to tell him when he wakes up at night because the war is just outside our door? How can I

26 Usher, 7.
27 Ibid, 7.
explain to my son why I am home from work for the fifth day in a row?...There is no why. There is only that I am not earning money to feed and clothe my family. I sit in my room and watch TV. I am restless and bored and humiliated. \(^{30}\)

And while it is still possible to keep younger children like Iyad off the streets and out of harm’s way, for older children who are more acutely aware of their parents’ helplessness, attempts to do so would be rather futile. These children see that their parents are no longer protectors and that their homes no longer offer refuge. \(^{31}\) Older children thus look up to the *shabab* on the streets, the young men who typically confront the Israeli tanks with stones. Furthermore, in her commentary on life under curfew during the first *intifada*, Sabbagh explains how previously, “the respectful and obedient child was considered superior; now the strong, muscular and aggressive child is more popular.” \(^{32}\)

**Survival & Resistance**

September 2002 marked the second anniversary of the *Al-Aqsa intifada*. At that time, it appeared that Israel’s attempts to quell the uprising had met with little success, for although the Palestinian casualty toll continued to rise and Israel continued to enact repressive policies, resistance to the occupation did not appear to lose strength. Furthermore, despite the trauma placed on Palestinian families as a result of the occupation, family cohesion has prevailed, and family life has played an important role not only in allowing Palestinians to cope with the realities of occupation; they have also served to enhance the spirit of resistance in many ways.

To understand how the Palestinian family can survive the conditions of occupation, one must first understand the nature of the family in Palestinian society. Palestinian society

\(^{30}\) Jennifer Loewenstein, “With neighbors like these,” *Live from Palestine* (2 May 2002).

\(^{31}\) Usher, 3.

\(^{32}\) Sabbagh, 17.
has always been, quite simply, a “highly family-oriented society.”\textsuperscript{33} This has especially been true since 1948, when Palestinians, lacking their own governmental entity and other formal institutions, increasingly looked to the family to preserve their society, and the family became the “center and the survival core” of Palestinian society.\textsuperscript{34} Extended family relationships tend to be very strong as well, thereby increasing avenues for support.\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, as Ghabra explains, during times of crisis, the extended family network begins to function more like an effective or nuclear family.\textsuperscript{36} Therefore, while the occupation often leads to trauma within the family, including separation from family members, for most people, there are generally other forms of support available to family members affected by political violence.

The prevalence of extended family networks can be seen through Palestinian housing patterns. For example, Sam Bahour lives with his wife and children on the first floor of a three-story house, while his wife’s parents live on the ground level and his own parents live on the second floor.\textsuperscript{37} This gives Bahour and his wife the ability to ensure the well-being of their parents, even during curfew. He describes how he is able to send sweets down to his in-laws during curfew by using a basket and rope tied to the front porch. It is also common for one house to be inhabited by three families of the same generation, as siblings tend to maintain close quarters with one another. Having the extra support of grown children, siblings, aunts and uncles makes some of the aspects of occupation a little more bearable, for even when fathers and husbands are detained or deported, one can usually find support from elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 17.
\textsuperscript{35} Khamis, 11.
\textsuperscript{36} Ghabra, 19.
\textsuperscript{37} Bahour, “Breaking the Fear.”
Also, the changing role of the Palestinian mother has contributed to the spirit of survival and resistance in the Occupied Territories. Women, particularly mothers, have become increasingly militant and political, this being a necessary response to the decreasing authority of fathers and to what Mayer describes as the occupation’s “attack on the private sphere” of Palestinian society.\(^{38}\) As Mayer further explains,

The family and the home have become the turf on which much of the power struggle between the Israeli army and resisting Palestinians has taken place... As the Palestinian home has opened up, involuntarily, to the Israeli army and to its searches and violence, the home and the family have also become agents in the national struggle, increasing Palestinian women’s nationalism.\(^{39}\)

A woman’s concern for her family and her subsequent anger towards the occupation are often the main factor that provoke her militancy. Islah Jad, a Palestinian mother, recounts an instance in which she, with her two daughters, came across a building that had been destroyed by Israeli forces and wherein several civilians had died. Jad then watches as temporary graves are set up outside the ruined structure. Her reaction to watching other mothers search for the remains of their family members is indicative of the spirit of resistance one finds amongst Palestinian women:

At this moment, I collapsed, the tears covered my face but to my surprise I found my self shouting slogans and saying, *bilroh, bildam nafdiki ya filistine* (“With our spirit, with our blood, we sacrifice O Palestine!”). All the women beside me were shouting the same—with tears, with cries, with anger, with screams.\(^{40}\)

As Palestinian mothers worry about protecting their children from the occupation, it is not only physical safety that is a concern. Ensuring that their children are granted some of their most basic rights is also important, even if such assurance necessitates direct disobedience to the occupation authorities. One of these fundamental rights, and one that is

\(^{38}\) Mayer, 63.
\(^{39}\) Ibid, 76.
\(^{40}\) Islah Jad, “Two letters to a friend in Egypt,” *Live from Palestine* (1 April 2002).
especially important in Palestinian communities, is the right to an education. In the first two years of the first intifada, West Bank schools were closed by military order for a total of 17 months. During the most recent intifada, it has been curfews that have primarily shut down schools. Keeping children away from schools is particularly frustrating to parents because of the emphasis traditionally placed on education in Palestinian society. Bahour describes education as being "second only to family in Palestinian life."

Parents often work with children in defying the rules of occupation. This can be seen in the alternative neighborhood schools set up by parents, in which volunteers teach groups of students who have been withheld from school. In Nablus, where curfew has been especially harsh, the system has become quite advanced:

[F]amilies in various neighborhoods in Nablus have set up classes for every school level. Volunteers teach groups of students in each neighborhood. Some families offered accommodations, garages and empty rooms, turned into classrooms. Each student brings a chair from home to sit on. Money was collected to buy black boards, pens and books. Such classes are held despite their prohibition. There is also danger risked in setting up such schools, for Shaka’a further reports that an alternative school discovered by Israeli forces had been tear gassed while classes were being taught.

However, parents and children alike are not satisfied with these secret sessions held in makeshift classrooms. In Nablus, in what has been perhaps one of the most powerful expressions of the will of the Palestinian people, mothers and children directly confronted the occupation and successfully forced schools back open. On a day of curfew, 200 children marched the streets with their mothers and demanded that the Ministry of Education open the

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41 Usher, 8.
42 Bahour, "The Violence of Curfew."
43 Ghadeer Shaka’a, "Nablus: Get the Soldiers out of my Town, I Want to Live Too," Live from Palestine (14 September 2002).
44 Ibid.
schools. They then collected signatures for appeals, and parents encouraged their children to break into schools and set up emergency classes. After a week of such activities, schools were officially opened, and more than 70 percent of the students in Nablus attended.\footnote{Shaka’a, “Nablus: We Opened the Schools,” \textit{Live from Palestine} (21 September 2002).} After the opening of the schools Shaka’a noted: “Now, thousands of brave mothers are determined to continue their actions and break the curfew on a daily basis, accompanying their children to school.”\footnote{Shaka’a, “Nablus: Open Our Schools, We Want to Learn,” \textit{Live from Palestine} (20 September 2002).} Although Palestinian mothers are often blamed for raising violent, undisciplined children,\footnote{Usher, 4.} this example of forcing the schools open in Nablus is a more accurate indication of the kind or resistance in which Palestinian parents encourage their children to partake.

**Children’s Responses & the Development of National Consciousness**

They forced the eldest son to kneel down and place his hands behind his head. They forced him to stay that way while they placed a gun to his head. Eventually, they let him go. His younger brother, around 13 years, and his niece, around 5 years of age, both witnessed this. You learn of stories like this, living here on the ground, but outside, all they can do is repeat the mantra about Palestinians teaching their children to hate.\footnote{Catherine Cook, “Too many images to process now,” \textit{Live from Palestine} (31 March 2002).}

This is a report given by Catherine Cook, an American living in the West Bank during the \textit{intifada}, as she speculates about the sort of effects that witnessing such violence will have on children. The danger that Cook alludes to, however, is not merely that of the impact of experiencing one or two random acts of violence. Rather, it is the totality of the occupation, with its military confrontations, house demolitions, and curfews; the sense of isolation and suppression; the inability of parents to create safe havens for their children or make promises for their safety. These are the factors that determine how the children of the occupation will respond to the world in which they live.
As earlier accounts indicate, children’s prolonged exposure to political violence causes parental authority to erode and shatters a child’s sense of security. Palestinian psychiatrist Dr. Eyad El Sarraj notes that a child’s psychological response to this phenomenon is “measured on a behavioral pendulum that swings wildly between defiance and fear.” To illustrate his point, Dr. El Sarraj tells the story of two six-year-old boys. One boy refused to leave his house for three months after watching his father be beaten by soldiers. The other, after being taunted and slapped by a soldier, responded by seeking revenge with stones.

The Live from Palestine diaries also show children who react to the occupation in both extremes. Majdi Al-Maliki, a Palestinian father in Ramallah, recounts the night that his family was awoken by the heavy sounds of shelling and explosions from fighting near his mother’s house, where the family was staying. He talks of the impact of being caught in the midst of the battle, especially how it affected his eight-year-old daughter Dalia:

Dalia of course woke up and sat on my lap in great fear. After a long half hour of shelling, suddenly the neon light fell, the house shook; it was as if we were in the midst of an earthquake, glass broke, we had no idea where, it sounded like everywhere, and Dalia was stunned with fear.

Two days after the initial fighting had begun, Al-Maliki learned that his own house had been used as a dormitory by the Israeli army. They had left it in total disarray, destroying even his daughters’ toys and books. After receiving this news and experiences another round of explosions and gunfire, “Dalia began to throw up, and would no longer eat.” Such was the extent of her fear and her reaction to the violence of occupation.

On the other hand, the diaries indicate that the other extreme Dr. El Sarraj speaks of, that of fearlessness, is perhaps even more commonplace among Palestinian children in the

49 Cited in Usher, 7.
50 Ibid, 7-8.
51 Majdi Al-Maliki, “We heard many explosions,” Live from Palestine (7 April 2002).
current intifada. This is especially true for older kids, who risk violating curfew to continue playing on the streets. Hanan Elmasu describes children playing soccer in a West Bank refugee camp who “are tear gassed and shot at by nearby Israeli soldiers, who then rush into their homes for protection, then come out half an hour later to resume their game, and go through the same process over and over again.”\(^5\) \(^2\) However, even very young children are often unfazed by the violence and danger of the occupation. In a shocking example, El Fassed writes of his nephew, not yet three years old, who stood on his balcony holding a plastic gun while Israeli military jeeps drove through the streets. His family was fearful that he might get shot and yelled for him to drop his toy and come inside. To this the boy responded, “Let them shoot me, I am not afraid of them.”\(^5\) \(^3\)

Such fearlessness, while being a response to the decreasing authority of parents, is also more simply a product of a growing familiarization with the occupation. While instances of direct and extreme violent confrontation will in many cases lead to anxiety in a child, the daily sight of soldiers with guns and military tanks patrolling the streets is no longer frightening to the children. The earlier example cited of children playing in the streets indicates this very fact. In a similar instance, Susan Brannon reports from Hebron that “[c]hildren have learned to ignore the sound of gunshots that perpetrate the city and continue to ‘role’ play, Palestinian and settler games.”\(^5\) \(^4\)

Indeed, these “role-playing” games that Brannon refers to offer another illustration as to how children internalize the occupation, especially how they interpret the relationship between the occupier and the occupied. Bahour describes the game his two daughters, aged eight and two, play only a few days after a group of soldiers had raided their home:

My girls have forgotten that the real soldiers and tanks are outside. They are playing hide and seek in the house. Nadine is the Palestinian and Areen is the Israeli soldier. Nadine hides under my desk as I type and when Areen knocks on my office door we all have to go and wait in the hallway as Areen checks the room. We even have cardboard passports to give Areen.\(^{55}\)

In another example, Toine van Teeffelen explains how her four-year-old daughter’s games “reflect the political situation.” The young girl pretends to handcuff her mother and put her in prison, and at other times she walks with a cane and limp in order to imitate someone who had been injured by an Israeli soldier. She also

...brags in front of the other children that she belongs to the shabab, the armed young men. She parades with her breast forward [sic], shouting \textit{ween al-sha’ab al ‘arabi}—where is the Arab people, a well-known song...Meanwhile she keeps laughing and tells other kids not to be afraid. She divides the world in people who shoot and who don’t.\(^{56}\)

To Usher, this sort of role-playing and other similar games, such as “soldiers and shubab” or “funeral” are “not simply the re-enactment of daily experience.” Rather, he continues, “it is the collective means by which children recover, internalize and identify with past and contemporary Palestinian reality as a way of neutralizing and apprehending the most offending features of that reality.”\(^{57}\)

Perhaps most startling about the games described above is how detailed the role-playing is and how well the children comprehend the realities of the occupation. It is not so surprising, however, when one realizes that words such soldiers, tear gas, rubber bullets, and torture are common in the vocabulary of Palestinian children as young as three.\(^{58}\) These are all concepts with which the children are well acquainted, as they grow up with a constant awareness of their status as an occupied people. This recognition invariably leads to the

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\(^{55}\) Sam Bahour, “Uninvited Guests Become Neighbors.” \textit{Live from Palestine} (1 July 2002).

\(^{56}\) Toine van Teeffelen, “An unusual siren,” \textit{Life from Palestine} (14 April 2002).

\(^{57}\) Usher, 9-10.

\(^{58}\) Study done on three-year-olds cited in Usher, 4.
development of an acute national consciousness among even young children. In describing the development of her own national consciousness, Palestinian scholar Nahla Abdo writes, “My national identity grew out of lacks, absences, suppressions, and denials. For me, as for most Palestinian citizens, national identity came to challenge our exclusion from, rather than express our inclusion within, the nation-state.” For Abdo, this consciousness did not develop until she was a teenager. However, for Palestinian children today, it develops much sooner as a result of the increasingly invasive nature of the occupation.

Therefore, when children break curfew to attend school, they do so not only out of personal desire to get an education; they do it with the intention of exerting their national will and resisting the occupation. Nine-year-old Laith explains that he and his friends have disobeyed orders to attend classes in an alternative neighborhood school because, “The Israelis have no right to lock me at home.” Later, when Ghadeer Shaka’a describes the attempt of mothers and children to open schools in Nablus, she explains, “All [the children] knew where they were headed to and why. They walked together without fear. Every child believed in his or her cause.” However, organized demonstrations are not required for children to feel that they are involved in the struggle against occupation. Merely playing in the streets during curfew is an act of defiance intended to make a statement to the occupying power. In the same way, even confronting soldiers with stones and revealing their fearlessness becomes a way for children to feel as though they have some means of fighting against the occupation. In some cases, children will even set up makeshift barricades using

60 El Fassed, “Nablus: I want to go to school.”
61 Ghadeer Shaka’a, “Nablus: ‘Open our schools, we want to learn.’”
garbage and household items in an attempt to prevent tanks from entering cities. Of course, such attempts do not actually halt the military’s aggression, but they do indicate the extent of children’s will to exhibit their resistance.

Stone throwing and other similar acts are also, more simply, an expression of one’s anger at the occupation. A great deal of resentment builds in children who are denied the opportunity to play with friends or the chance to go to school. Furthermore, when they do go to school, it is often in the face of daunting obstacles and incredible violence. As she stands in line at the infamous Qalandia checkpoint, Andrea Becker notices a group of children on their way to school. The children walk quickly as soldiers yell at them and a smoke bomb is hurled in their direction. Gunfire and sound bombs serve as the background noise for this scene. At other times, one finds children whose homes had recently been demolished collecting clothes and toys in the midst of the rubble. These are some of the daily experiences of Palestinian children. Cook concludes that under such conditions, “If these kids...grow to hate, there is little question in my mind where they learned it.”

The story of the Palestinian families is a story of suffering and resistance. Yet, all too often, the political nature of the conflict makes any mention of that suffering and resistance a controversy. Therefore, the experiences that families undergo are often ignored. Otherwise, they tend to be marginalized so that all we see are violent youth presumably sent out to be martyred by their unscrupulous mothers, who have taught them to hate and glorify death.

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62 Jennifer Loewenstein, “In the eye of the storm,” Live from Palestine (7 April 2002).
65 Cook, “Too many images to process now.”
Yet, while children do factor prominently in the intifada, this oversimplified image and the assumptions made about it are far from the truth.

The best way to discern the truth is, to use the words of Edward Said, to project the Palestinians as human beings—that is, to give agency to them as a people and as individuals. Thus, while the main priority of this study has been to analyze how Palestinian families have been affected by the policies of occupation, how families cope within the context of occupation, and what implications occupation has for the upbringing of Palestinian children, it has more generally sought to provide a human face to the Palestinian population. That face is the face of the concerned mother, the humiliated father, the distressed grandparent, and the sometimes frightened, sometimes fearless child. But more than anything, it is the face—whether old or young, male or female—of someone struggling everyday to survive and oppose the chaos that abounds.