

Tussling ferociously, Palestinian children play a game they call "Arabs and Jews," top and bottom right. Psychiatrists call this post-traumatic play, and it is a sorry symptom of life in a violent society where young men wear bullets plucked from their own wounds as badges of honour, bottom left.



ragged and torn red T-shirt. He is crouching in the dirt behind the wall near me, his body tensed up like a cat ready to spring. "We have nothing else to do," he says. "I want the Israeli soldiers to come back so we can show them the real Intifada." He shows me his own battle scars—two bullet holes in each of his legs, received after he

threw stones at Israeli soldiers. As he speaks, his eyes dart with primal alertness, eager for the game to resume.

I watch the little boys gather together and chant, then drop to their knees in mock Muslim prayer as the "soldiers' approach. The soldiers laugh and prod them with their feet and gun barrels. Suddenly the young

boys jump up, run a short distance, then turn and hurl stones. Dust flies from make-believe tear gas. A soldier shoots Arabs from a nearby rooftop. Some children even play Arab mothers who race into the clash to rescue their children. Their play is unnervingly intense. Feelings of defiance and white-hot anger erupt as they chase, beat, drag, shoot, and often hurt and humiliate each other, sometimes to the point of tears.

"How often do you play this game?" I ask one of them. "Every day," he says. A young boy walks in big circles, chanting what he has heard broadcast from Israeli peeps. "People of Jabalia, you are under curfew. Anyone found outside their homes, looking out windows, or standing on their balconies will be shot. People of Jabalia, you are under curfew..."

TO THESE CHILDREN—KNOWN AS the "Children of the Stones" or "Heroes of the Intifada" during the last few years of Israeli presence in Gaza—Arabs and Jews is just a game. To the psychiatrists who treat people living in war-zone conditions, it is reenactment, or post-traumatic play. The children's repetitive acting out of past events is a classic symptom of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In psychiatric parlance, they are attempting to master the trauma, struggling to give meaning to overwhelming events.

Because of the Gaza Strip's unusual concentration of traumatized children and families, the region is a global centre for the serious study of what trauma does to people—and how the damage can be fixed. "Everyone in Gaza is traumatized," says Dr. Eyal el-Sarraj, a pre-eminent psychiatrist and founder and director of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP). "Forty thousand Palestinian children need immediate psychiatric care."

I have come to Gaza to spend time with el-Sarraj and his colleagues as they struggle with an unthinkable

daunting problem. The study and treatment of trauma is a relatively new area in psychiatry. It was only in 1980, for instance, that the American Psychiatric Association recognized PTSD as a diagnostic category. The term was first used with reference to American soldiers returning from Vietnam. Before that, terms such as shell shock, battle fatigue, and Freud's term hysteria came closest to describing its symptoms.

Today counsellors at the GCMHP, the area's only mental-health facility, work with the standard modern definition of trauma as any event that is outside the range of usual human experience and overwhelms almost anyone's psychological capacity to cope. By that definition, Palestinians in Gaza have suffered a litany of traumatizing events, with children especially afflicted.

In 1992 and 1993, the GCMHP surveyed 2,779 Palestinian children between the ages of 8 and 15 and found that "93% were tear-gassed, 85% had their homes raided, 55% witnessed their fathers beaten, 42% were beaten, 31% were shot, 28% had a brother imprisoned, 19% have been detained; 3% had suffered death in their family...and 69% were exposed to more than four different types of trauma." Jim Graff, a professor at the University of Toronto and author of the book *Palestinian Children and Israeli State Violence*, estimates that one in three Palestinian children in Gaza has been detained or injured since the start of the Intifada, affecting families pervasively. "Almost no home has been spared," he says.

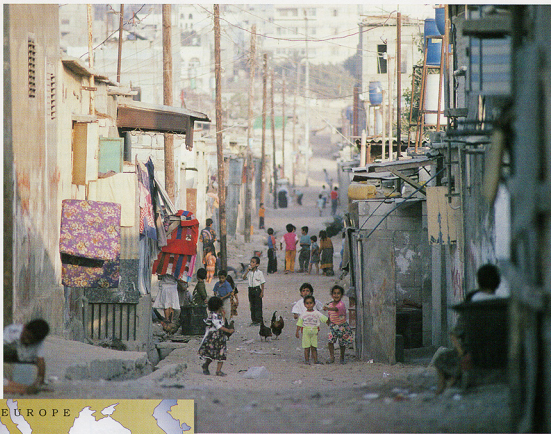
The extraordinary events were played out in a context of routine daily pressures: the Israeli military imposed curfews on Palestinians every night during the Intifada—and often 24 hours a day for weeks on end. Schools, playgrounds, and sports clubs in Gaza were frequently closed down by Israeli military. With all healthy

socializing structures destroyed by military rule, Palestinian children fell easily into a dangerous mind-set of resisting authority and admiring guns.

MEET THE HUMAN FACE OF TRAUMA when I visit the family of Alam, a 15-year-old boy who became a quadriplegic when an Israeli bullet shattered his neck and spinal cord. Eighteen months after the incident, he is lying in a metal bed in his family's large two-storey house in the centre of Gaza City. Outside, the rusty front gate, crumbling sidewalk, and garbage scattered around an overgrown garden speak of better days gone by. Alam blinks his eyes once or twice while his father, once a prosperous businessman, says to him, "You have ruined my life, your mother's, and all your brothers' and sisters' lives." His mother sits still as a stone. Samir Zaqout, a social worker from the GCMHP, also sits quietly and listens. "My business is gone, all our

"Everyone in Gaza is traumatized. Forty thousand Palestinian children need immediate psychiatric care."

possessions are gone, the car, my wife's jewellery," continues the father. "The rich countries should pay to renovate my house, buy a car, and pay for a nurse for my son, so I can go back to work." The father wears a white shirt, pressed pants, and shiny shoes—signs of affluence in Gaza—but seems broken in spirit. He looks at the floor with glassy eyes. Turning to me, he asks, "Can you ask your government to help me?" and momentarily covers his face with his hands and wipes his tears away. Alam's eyes remain fixed on the ceiling while his father rages on in a tragic dance of



Camps such as the Beach Camp, above, house some two-thirds of the 900,000 Palestinians in Gaza. Social conditions are appalling: population density is among the highest in the world, and unemployment runs at 50 percent.

denial and blame. His ranting is cut off when a Palestinian soldier, who has been visiting a neighbour, abruptly struts into the room. He walks over to Alam's bed, holds the chamber of his Kalashnikov close to the boy's head, and fires it in the air in a nationalistic salute. No one except me flinches from the deafening percussion. Alam smiles and poses for a photo with the soldier in a twisted tableau that strives to put the face of victory on a terrible defeat. As we leave the home, I ask Samir what happens next with this family. "They have to call me, but I'm sure the

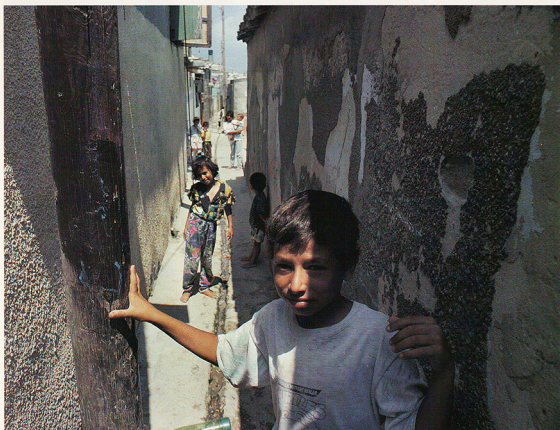


Trauma worker Samir Zaqout, far right, visits the grieving family of Alan, 15, paralyzed by a gunshot wound. "I know many families like this," says Zaqout. "I can only help the ones who are ready to be helped."

father won't," says Samir, a 40-year-old former high school teacher who has a B.A. in sociology from Alexandria University in Egypt and has spent a year in an Israeli prison as a political prisoner. "The mother might, but she would have to call without him knowing. If I initiate the next visit, the father will want money from me, and when I refuse, he will add me and the Programme to his list of people to blame. This man believes money will solve everything. His defences keep his whole family stuck in denial. I know many families like this, but I can only help the ones who are ready to be helped." Maybe this family will contact him, or maybe they won't. He hopes they do. Samir's plan of attack may seem a little uncertain, but he is working in gen-

uinely uncertain territory. Psychologically speaking, PTSD strikes people for reasons that vary from individual to individual. And culturally speaking, Palestinian life in Gaza offers many serious obstacles to its treatment, including taboos about mental illness, authoritarian social structures, and suffocating economic and political problems. Working in defiance of such circumstances, Eyad el-Sarraj set up the GCMHP in 1990 with help from international donors (including about \$50,000 from the Canadian embassy). It employs 22 health workers and 38 support staff at three facilities in the Gaza Strip and has treated more than 7,000 patients, including 3,500 children. To get an in-depth sense of its counselling methods and goals, I arrange to visit one

of the program's typical success stories. When I first spot Kamal, age 9, he's wearing a torn T-shirt and standing barefoot beside the iron door of his home in the Beach Camp. The smell of rotting garbage hangs in the humid air; sewage drains down open troughs along narrow alleys with high walls that separate a maze of crowded cinder-block houses. Kamal lives here with his father, who sells vegetables in the local market; his mother, an unemployed nurse; and six brothers and sisters. We sit in the open air of their little courtyard and listen to Kamal's story. While making an innocent trip to the store one day, he says, he was followed home when Israeli soldiers mistook him for a boy who had just thrown stones at them. "My mother tried to



critical prerequisites for healing. As I watch her, I recall that el-Sarraj has told me that "love is often the best form of therapy that there is."

In more clinical terms, through the slow, sensitive process of play therapy, children can use props to draw on both the verbal and behavioural levels of memory to reconstruct a traumatic incident. By remembering it precisely and perhaps play-acting some kind of control over it, they can stop denying or avoiding it and can transform it from a haunting memory into a comprehensible event. The nature of play itself can help a child make these leaps more readily, less painfully. "Because playing is a mixture of reality and 'not reality,' the child...can use it to show what he wished to do [after a traumatic event], such as escape, revenge, etc.," wrote Christie. "During the playing process, a person can die and



Standing in the alley where he was once terrorized by soldiers, top, young Kamal, 9, can count himself lucky to have recovered—not only in body but in mind. His psychological healing was aided by the patient, sensitive work of counsellor Raghdia Baba, bottom. She's pictured here in a typical session of play therapy with 6-year-old Eynas, using toys to dramatize and exorcise psychological problems.



Her face bearing the haunted look of someone whose dreams have perished, a protesting Palestinian mother holds a portrait of her imprisoned son. Says one expert: "Almost no home has been spared" the impact of trauma.

then live again. Children know this, and it gives them the necessary distance to...remember without too much pain. They don't need to say, "This happened to me."

Raghdha Saba's sessions with Kamal were exemplary. Seeing him every 10 days or so for several months, she found Kamal so humiliated by his encounter with the soldiers that he initially preferred to recount it from the point of view of a doll. Raghdha replays an audiotape for me of a session in which Kamal places a group of toy models of soldiers, jeeps, cars, guns, handcuffs, and wireless phones in position facing a lone figure of a masked man. She asks him whether the soldiers will be able to imprison this man and how he will then be treated. Kamal describes how the man will be beaten all over his body with sticks and iron bars and guns. The dialogue proceeds:

Raghdha: "What do you think when the masked man was beaten with a gun, a stick, and a bar of iron. What was his feeling?"
Kamal: "He will die."
Raghdha: "He will die. Oh, this is sad!"
Kamal: "Yes."
Raghdha: "If anybody else were at the place of the masked man, he would feel that he would die."

Kamal: "Yes, he would feel that he would die."
Although Kamal does not tell his story from his own point of view, certain details suggest it is about himself. "He pointed to the beaten areas of his own body and not to the doll," says Raghdha, "and his description of the feeling connected to it is obviously self-experienced: the overwhelming feeling is that he is going to die."

Within a month or so of treatments, Kamal had fewer nightmares, socialized more, and became more active. But he was still behaving aggressively and had episodes of playing with fire and beating his siblings. In some of his treatment sessions, Kamal played with dolls in scenarios that projected himself as an aggressor, in control of his sit-

uation. Once, when Raghdha moved a toy soldier figure aggressively toward another figure that Kamal was holding, she recalls, he "at first withdrew timidly, but after a while, his figure fought back, and we could see a nice, relieved smile on his face." Working slowly and sensitively, Raghdha helped Kamal express his aggressive urges and ultimately understand them as a product of something that happened to him through no fault of his own. "Children often blame themselves when a trauma happens," says Raghdha. "It is a way to try to give meaning to an event. Children often identify with the aggressor because they want to be the powerful person and often are destructive toward other persons."

Kamal had his setbacks and suffered one major relapse, but after eight months was considered successfully treated. "A complete cure is difficult to predict," says el-Sarraj. "In some cases, even after the disappearance of symptoms, you can't guarantee that they won't come back." Nonetheless, in the progress he has made, Kamal is considered one of the lucky ones.

IN TREATING ADULTS, GAZA'S MENTAL-health workers often just talk problems through with patients. Using forms of art in therapy has also helped adults understand and cope with traumatic events. With adults, however, counsellors can encounter more complex inhibitions against free-flowing self-expression. I learn about this through the experiences of Ruta Yowney, who is my life partner in Canada and is a professionally trained music therapist. She has travelled to Gaza with me to do some work under the sponsorship of The Near East Cultural and Educational Foundation of Canada, a volunteer group that does public education and backs various projects in the Arab world. Once a week for a month, she

meets with a group of eight men at the GCMHP's occupational-therapy centre in Jabalia, where Palestinian therapists offer woodworking, weaving, embroidery, painting, and drawing as engaging and creative outlets for their patients. After Ruta does a session with her own specialty of music therapy, she meets resistance from a staff counsellor who is concerned that music "weakens the soul." It is a predictable perspective born of the Intifada, when all forms of

"Children often blame themselves when a trauma happens. It is a way to try to give meaning to an event."

entertainment were condemned by the fundamentalist Muslim Hamas Party—in a move with wide public support—as shameful activities that betray the dead and the suffering and dishonour the Palestinian cause.

Against the odds, Ruta argues that music feeds the soul. She experiences a satisfying moment when she brings together the eight Palestinian men—diagnosed with manic and psychotic depression, PTSD, and schizophrenia—to form a circle to play drums and sing and dance. "Sharing the music brings them out," she reasons. "They can relax and express themselves in a new way. Establishing trust in a group or family is a real issue here, and music can help that."

In another exercise, Ruta asks each of the men to draw pictures depicting their past, present, and future while they listen to the three different pieces of Arab music. One man, Jihad, draws only two pictures, both from the past. In the far past is water and boats, building a house, and driving a car. In the near past is a masked man killing a boy. Eighteen months ago, I learn, Jihad

found his 15-year-old son, Nedal, on a garbage pile with a bullet hole through his brain. He was executed by a relative of a next-door family who claim he was collaborating with the Israelis—a terrible stigma that spreads quickly in Gaza. Nedal belonged to the moderate, Fatah faction of the PLO, and friends claim he was a loyal Palestinian.

Jihad's family is diagnosed with PTSD; their home is a shrine to Nedal. The walls are decorated with pictures,

wonder whether there is any hope for people living in a society where trauma is so "normal," where it's not unusual to hear comments such as, "I didn't bother to tell my parents I was shot, because it was only a plastic bullet."

The peculiarly complex dimensions of trauma in Gaza are reflected in the life and work of Eyad el-Sarraj. Though internationally renowned as a trauma psychiatrist, he is just as prominent in politics at home. He was a Palestinian peace negotiator and is an outspoken human-rights advocate with a seat on the Palestinians for Citizens' Rights Commission. For el-Sarraj, the psychiatric and political work are inextricably linked. He believes that Palestinians ultimately suffer a collective trauma that won't be cured until a political solution brings peace to their daily lives.

He points to the partition of Palestine in 1948 as "the catastrophe that was and has become the centre of the fear and insecurity that is part of the current Palestinian psyche." He himself was not untouched by that history. When he was a young boy, his family was forced out of their home in Beer-sheva, a town about 90 kilometres southwest of Jerusalem, when the United Nations declared their land part of the new State of Israel. His family left at the time, and from there witnessed two more decades of Palestinian dismemberment in the Middle East. Since Israel won control of the Gaza Strip from Egypt in 1967, his father and brother have both been imprisoned by the Israelis. "I knew if I was to become a doctor, it would be a way to help and not kill anyone," el-Sarraj tells me as we stroll along the Mediterranean beach one morning just outside Gaza City.

After completing medical school he went to London University, where he earned a diploma in psychological medicine. He returned to Gaza in 1977 and began to realize that most of his pa-

tients were victims of violence, leading him to specialize in trauma therapy.

Today, it is el-Sarraj's personal mission not to blame the Jews for the problems of the Arabs but to recognize their common humanity and similar histories as victims. "The Israelis," he wrote in a paper, "survivors of a long history of persecution...are still bearing the scars of victimization...which culminated in the horrors of the Holocaust." And victims, he knows, tend to turn into perpetrators—a dynamic he wants to end in his own people. "Violence has to end with the victim," he says. "If we want to stop the Palestinians from humiliating and violating their own children with the anger of the Nazis against the Jews that was then projected onto the Palestinians, we have to empower the victim in order to break the cycle."

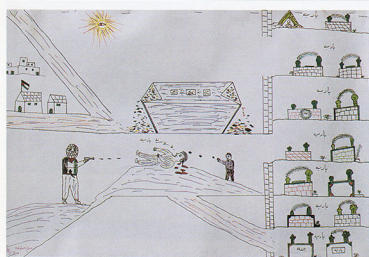
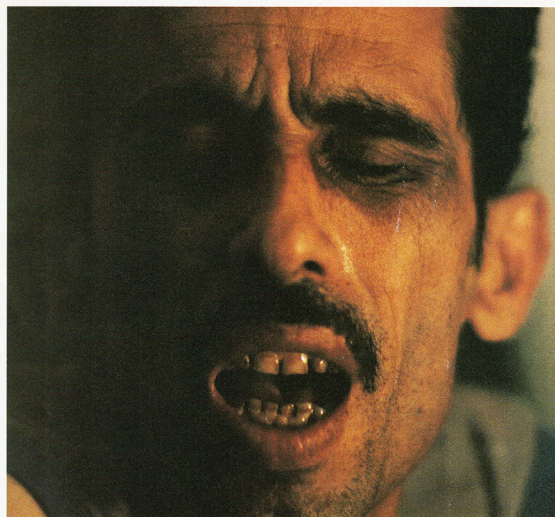
The notion of cycles of violence perpetrated by psychically numbed victims is one that echoes for me constantly in Gaza. I see it when I read an Israeli soldier's diary describing his beating of a Palestinian child. "I beat my awareness to a pulp," he writes. "I find myself an animal and not a human being. Recalling what happened to the Jews 45 years ago, I stand there in my uniform and my metal helmet, with a gun and a club—but no consciousness." And I meet it again when a Palestinian cab driver tells me how he was tortured by Israeli soldiers, his testicles squeezed and his head covered by a cloth soaked smelling of human wastes. "The only time I feel good now," he says, "is when I hit someone or break something."

On this theme of cyclical violence, a major worry for el-Sarraj is that Palestinian children in Gaza have come to admire the power and authority of the Israeli soldiers. Many have seen their own fathers humiliated by beatings or forcibly removed from the home and imprisoned. "At the very least, they are driven to look for heroes to replace their fathers, who failed the test," says el-Sarraj. In a terrible illustration of his words, a mother of eight in Khan Younis tells me, "You can't imagine the help-

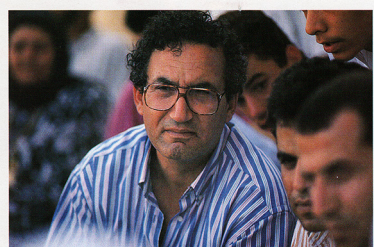
"The only time I feel good now," says the torture victim, "is when I hit someone or break something."

posters, letters, a large Palestinian flag, and testimonials from Fatah supporters. "I'm not crazy," says Jihad, "but if I had a gun, I would kill the neighbours right now, and if I don't do it, I hope my son will." His eyes seem frozen yet unable to hold back the tears that seep from the gaunt sockets, blackened from sleepless nights. His wife sits across the room, motionless, trying to understand a story with no end, and their son sits quietly next to her. "What do you want to do when you grow up?" I ask the boy. "I want to get a gun and kill the neighbours," he says.

AFTER A FEW WEEKS IN GAZA, I AM, like most visitors, overwhelmed by my cumulative encounters with traumatized people. In theory, a family like Jihad's can be helped if they can express their fears to an objective and compassionate listener. In practice, there are not enough listeners to go around. And even those available can't be expected to be entirely objective, since virtually all have exposure to trauma. I begin to



Shattered by grief, above, a man named Jihad can think of no future for himself in the wake of his son's death by a bullet to the brain. In his therapy session, he can draw only a poignant picture of his past, left, that graphically depicts the moment his life came unhinged. In theory, a family like Jihad's can be helped if they can express their fears to an objective, compassionate listener. In practice, there are not enough listeners to go around, and few can be expected to be objective.



Born into a land of perpetual factional strife, Eyad el-Sarraj fixes his hopeful sights on a future where "violence has to end with the victim."

ness...to watch my husband beaten almost to death because he refused to put out a burning tire with his bare hands." She now has one 12-year-old son who asks his quadriplegic father, "How can you take care of me, when you can't take care of yourself?" And her smaller children run around in military fatigues, shooting toy guns and playing "road block," using shoes for barricades.

In the days following the end of Israeli occupation, el-Sarraj voiced concern that "Palestinians will turn their anger on each other. I suspect we will see an increase in family violence. In the Palestinian police force, many have been tortured, and maybe they will start abusing those around them." (His words proved prescient. In September of 1994, 13 people died when Palestinian police clashed with Islamic militants; el-Sarraj told a *Globe and Mail* reporter it was his "saddest day" as a Gazan.)

AS HE CONTEMPLATES THE FUTURE IN Gaza, Eyad el-Sarraj has his work cut out for him, even in maintaining daily operations. When I arrive in Gaza, the GCMHP staff has been working without pay for nearly three months. It seems that the region's political uncertainty is scaring off donors. And el-Sar-

raj has been taking out personal loans to keep things afloat. Nonetheless, his plans for the GCMHP are quite ambitious. "In the future, I hope we will create a unique Palestinian institute for mental health and human rights in which the design of the curriculum for our staff and trainees considers not only the Arab Muslim culture but also the culture of colonization and oppression. It will be a focal point for teaching and learning in the Middle East."

To an outside visitor, the situation seems all but hopeless. In Palestinian life, the despair of public shame and personal guilt meet the euphoria of martyrdom and nationalism. While the Intifada initially brought all Palestinians together against the Israelis, clan and family allegiances have grown, fuelling fierce internal power struggles. For the Hamas, the Muslim fundamentalist party, peace in Gaza means betraying the dead whose martyred blood stains the land they lost. Meanwhile, for Jewish settlers, especially the Messianic ones, "God's Chosen People," peace means giving up their dream of the Holy Land—a

complete Eretz-Israel. With unhealed wounds and unfulfilled dreams, both extremes fight blindly to correct past injustices. And while the official occupation is over, thousands of Israeli soldiers remain, guarding some 4,800 Israeli settlers still living in Gaza. Jews and Arabs both remain victims, resisting each other and themselves.

But at least one man holds out hope. "I strongly believe that behind the facade of the military machines, there are real human beings who want to live in peace and love and to share with other human beings rather than be tools of oppression," says el-Sarraj. "The problem is the environment of hatred, rage, anger, oppression, and revenge."

El-Sarraj has a story that perhaps explains his inner reserves. He was once stopped during the Intifada and ordered by an Israeli soldier to extinguish flames from a burning tire with his bare hands. He refused the order. When the soldier threatened to take his identification card, el-Sarraj didn't protest. "Go ahead, take it, I don't care," he said. And when the soldier threatened

"I believe that behind the military machines, there are real human beings who want to live in peace and love."

to beat him, el-Sarraj said, "Go ahead, but before you do, I know there is a real human being behind that uniform, and I would like you to show me that person." The soldier got tears in his eyes, and then he just walked away.

Robert Semeniuk is an *Equinox* field correspondent who lives in British Columbia. Most recently he was the photographer for "The Struggles of the Sikhs" (July/August 1994).