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The Israeli–Palestinian conflict: Effects on youth adjustment, available interventions, and future research directions



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ABSTRACT

A large number of children are exposed to on-going political violence around the world. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is one of the longest on-going conflicts in the world and its documented negative effects on the health, development, and well-being of children and youth are profound. The aim of the present manuscript is to provide an updated review of research on children and youth in Israel and Palestine including both basic and treatment research. Results indicated that rates of psychopathology in children exposed to political violence are high, but fluctuate greatly depending on the sample and timing of data collection. Palestinians and Palestinian–Israelis evidence higher rates of exposure and distress, indicating that considerations of elements of the social context (e.g., stigma, access to resources) are important to evaluate in conceptualizing children's reactions to political violence. Identified gaps include a lack of focus on resilient outcomes, a dearth of longitudinal work resulting in an incomplete assessment of mediators and moderators of change, and a relatively small number of treatment studies. Suggested future directions include longitudinal studies that incorporate contextual (e.g., social ecological) and theoretically-based (e.g., emotional security theory) directions for understanding children's functioning after exposure to political violence and the development of translational treatment paradigms also including these elements.

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A large number of children are exposed to on-going political violence around the world. Currently, the number of refugees worldwide is approximately 43 million, 41% of whom are children (United Nations, <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/refugees/>). Palestinians represent one of the largest refugee populations in the world, and for those still living in Israel and Palestine, violence is chronic. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been on-going since the state of Israel was created in 1948, representing one of the longest intractable conflicts and the only nation in the world that has never had a “conflict free” year (Human Security Report, 2009/2010). Chronic exposure to war and mass trauma place children at extremely high risk for a host of negative consequences including refugeeism, lack of access to basic needs, physical health problems, developmental maladjustment, and long-term mental health problems (Cliff & Noormahomed, 1993; Hick, 2001; Masten & Narayan, 2012; Wachs & Rahman, 2013).

Several theoretical papers and literature reviews on the topic of children and political violence have been written to help summarize and synthesize the diverse scope of on-going research around the world. There are several points upon which reviews and theory papers on the effects of political violence on children (globally) converge. First, there is general agreement that the effects of political violence on children are necessarily understood multisystemically, as political violence affects multiple facets of children’s familial, neighborhood, and community contexts (Betancourt, 2012; Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Dubow, Huesmann, & Boxer, 2009; Masten & Narayan, 2012; Tol, Song, & Jordans, 2013). There is also a growing insistence on understanding *both* psychopathology and protective and promotive factors that are pertinent to resilience (e.g., Barber, 2009, 2014; Masten & Narayan, 2012; Tol et al., 2013). Unlike research on other types of childhood trauma, which underscores similar concepts, summative work on political violence and children calls for the consideration and integration of unique and context-specific domains, including political ideology, hatred, displacement/refugeeism, and child combatant history (e.g., Barenbaum, Ruchkin, & Schwab-Stone, 2004; Dubow, Huesmann et al., 2009).

While broad reviews are critically important to forming field-wide advances in research priorities, design, and methods, more focused reviews are able to serve a number of important purposes. Reviews focusing on a specific construct (e.g., resilience; Barber, 2013; Tol et al., 2013) or on a particular region (Israel–Palestine; Dimitry, 2012) are advantaged in that they can provide more depth and documentation of contemporary work in a particular topical domain or region. These more specific regional reviews often reflect the core structure of reviews in the field at large (e.g., the social-ecological model; Betancourt, 2012), but are able to address the deeper contextual particularities that can inform translational research and intervention in specific geographical regions. Further, context specific reviews allow for a more nuanced evaluation of context-specific considerations in assessment and treatment; a priority that has been underscored by many researchers (Barber, 2014; Barenbaum, Ruchkin & Schwab-Stone, 2004). Region-specific reviews also provide critical documentation of the extent to which research in a specific context or topical area reflects contemporary priorities articulated in theoretical and global review work. One goal of the current review, then, is to provide region-specific depth and analysis within a common contemporary framework for research on children and political violence – the social ecological model.

The current review must also be situated within the context of previous region-specific review work. Previous reviews of the effects of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict on children also demonstrate clear negative effects on child adjustment (Dimitry, 2012; Sagi-Schwartz, 2008; Qouta, Punamäki, & El Sarraj, 2008), but extant work focuses primarily on summarizing the effects of violence on adjustment and has engaged in more limited explorations of risk and protective factors across the social ecology (with the exception of Qouta, Punamäki, Miller, & El-Sarraj, 2008). In addition, no review of the psychological literature in Israel and Palestine has clearly articulated the extent to which existing basic research is capable of and used to inform the development of intervention programming. This is, perhaps, because extant reviews have only considered a portion of available research (e.g., Qouta et al., 2008 review only their own work; 50–71 studies are included in other reviews as compared to 114 in the current review; see Fig. 2). Tables 1–4 thus provide an extensive treatment of the extant literature, the most comprehensive to this point, on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and youth adjustment. Throughout this review, also reflected in Tables 1–4, context-specific risk and protective factors are addressed.

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