



# The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Meta-analysis of exposure and outcome relations for children of the region



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## ABSTRACT

This meta-analysis of 20 studies (including a total of 26,302 children) examined effects of political violence exposure for Jewish Israeli, Arab Israeli and Palestinian youth from 12 years of research in the Middle East conflict. The meta-analysis found a small relation between exposure and all symptoms examined, namely posttraumatic, behavioral and emotional symptoms, among all children. The relation between exposure and posttraumatic or emotional symptoms was significantly higher than that between exposure and behavioral symptoms. The relation between proximity to exposure and symptoms was significantly stronger than that for direct exposure, which was significantly stronger than that for media exposure. Implications of these findings extend beyond the geographic borders of this particular conflict. Millions of children worldwide are affected by armed conflict, war and terrorism and understanding the toll on children is of theoretical, clinical and practical import.

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## 1. Introduction

Political violence often deliberately targets civilians, including children, producing dangerous environments that undermine potential for healthy development. Millions of children and adolescents are exposed to war, terrorism and conflict both directly and indirectly with deleterious effects (Becker-Blease, Turner, & Finkelhor, 2010; Slone & Shoshani, 2014). The expanse and complexity of effects of these conflicts on children has prompted significant research (Barber, 2008; Myers-Walls, 2004; Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). However, research foci include different contexts and contents, designs are varied, and findings are mixed and complex, limiting the presentation of clear conclusions (Masten & Narayan, 2012; Pine, Costello, & Masten, 2005; Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). The aim of this meta-analysis was to analyze basic factors relating to the effects of political violence exposure on children in order to initiate formation of an integrated account of the research. A meta-analysis that addresses the differential relations that may exist between different dimensions of exposure, theorized as precursors, and different types of outcomes would appear to be the most

comprehensive method to disentangle evidence for effects of political violence exposure on youth.

The present analysis selected one particular conflict environment, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, over a demarcated period, in the attempt to collate extant literature and provide a model for comprehensive examination of other conflicts. The salience of the religious, national, ethnic identity, and cultural dimensions involved in this conflict have produced almost worldwide awareness, involvement and implications. Literature on the effects of world-ranging wars and political conflicts on children precludes combination into one over-arching analysis (Wang et al., 2006). However, combination and analysis of increasingly larger databases could lead to more comprehensive understanding of the complex effects of these dangerous environments on children.

### 1.1. Psychological effects of warfare on children

Classical theoretical models of stress have addressed the link between experiencing harsh, traumatic events and decreased psychological well-being. One of the earliest models claimed that a greater number of traumatic life events would lead to greater distress (Abbey & Andrews, 1985; Headey & Wearing, 1989). While early models also stressed the importance of personal vulnerability to stress (e.g., the diathesis-stress model, Monroe & Simons, 1991), it has been acknowledged for several decades that negative life events have an influence

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on well-being that extends beyond personal traits (Headey & Wearing, 1989).

Past meta-analyses examining the impact of exposure to various types of violence on children's symptoms have found small to medium effect sizes. For instance, a small effect size was reported in the relation between exposure to inter-family violence such as domestic violence, and children's emotional and behavioral problems (Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003). Similarly, a small to moderate effect size was found for the link between exposure to community violence and children's mental health outcomes (Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009).

When addressing exposure to political violence, the expectation that higher levels of exposure to traumatic events would lead to higher levels of distress has not received compelling support. Weak correlations in exposure to outcome relations and evidence of variance in type and severity of consequences cast doubts about this relation (Barber, 2013; Slone & Shechner, 2009). Thus, despite the violence and destructiveness inherent in political conflict, maladaptive functioning and psychiatric disturbance might be avoidable.

Indeed, in the context of political violence, there might be other factors that need to be considered when examining the impact of exposure to such violence on children. The ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) stresses that the context of experienced events should be taken into account when examining the impact of such events on the individual. Identification with a certain side of the conflict might be a factor that influences level of distress following exposure to conflict-related events (Shechner, Slone, & Bialik, 2007).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a long-standing conflict, one that many describe as central to the inter-state relations in the Middle East (Hahn, 2005). As such, it has been the center of much literature in the past decades. Indeed, the impact of armed conflicts, terrorism and conflict-related violence in general, and in the Middle East in particular, on the well-being of children has been a target of several focused scholarly efforts. However, there is much still unknown as to the magnitude of the relation between exposure to violent conflict-related events and mental health. For instance, recent reviews ascertained that children and youth report mental health consequences due to conflicts in the Middle East (Dimitry, 2012) and worldwide (Attanayake et al., 2009). However, in some of these studies, the magnitude of different consequences was not examined or compared, while in others, the focus was on psychological distress or post-trauma only. Similar strategy was taken in studies examining disasters and posttraumatic stress symptoms (Neria, Nandi, & Galea, 2008), with findings indicating the link between the two constructs with no analysis of the strength of the link. Thus, while leading researchers in the field emphasize taking an ecological perspective on the impact of war and conflict on children (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Schermerhorn, Merrilees, & Cairns, 2009), the strength of the exposure – distress link remains inconclusive.

## 1.2. Exposure and distress

Study of this relation necessitates fine-grained analysis of both exposure and outcome variables. This approach has been taken when examining exposure to other complex violent circumstances, such as community violence (Fowler et al., 2009). Conflict events occur within different contexts and do not entail universal exposure or response. Rather, events differ across various spectra including acute to chronic, single episode to cumulative, direct to indirect, and proximate to distant. Exposure to events under different circumstances may produce different meanings and impact; for instance, accompanying circumstances, vicarious exposure via the media, or previous personal exposure could produce differential experiences of the same event (Braun-Lewensohn et al., 2009; Slone & Shoshani, 2014). Discriminating between different types of exposure, rather than aggregating the different experiences of war and conflict, would enable detection of potential outcomes of different aspects of exposure (Layne et al., 2010). Methodologies quantifying political violence

exposure have strengthened quantitative research of the relations between co-varying event exposure and its consequences. Similarly, psychological consequences of political violence span a wide spectrum of sub-clinical and clinical difficulties (Slone & Shechner, 2009), including posttraumatic (Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2007; Solomon & Lavi, 2005), emotional (I. Lavi & Slone, 2011) and behavioral-functional symptoms (Abdeen, Qasrawi, Nabil, & Shaheen, 2008). Analysis of all possible outcomes was outside the scope of the present meta-analysis, which was limited to the mental health categories most widely studied and included intra-psycho psychological and emotional states, behavior and functioning, and posttraumatic symptoms.

Focusing on a certain time period of a specific conflict enabled a first step in examination of the presence and magnitude of the exposure-distress link, one that should be continued in the study of other conflicts. The focus of this meta-analysis was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for a 12-year period of increased violence beginning in 2000 (commonly referred to as the Second Intifada, with the term Intifada denoting Palestinian uprising). This time span included periods of terrorism, missile attacks, wars, residential relocations, military operations, and relatively quiet periods, reflecting dynamically changing politically violent conditions. Although this is a particular example of growing up in chronic conflict that is highly ideological and identity-focused for youth, there is much to be learned from this conflict that is, in a sense, being played out on a world stage.

Selection of this conflict has several advantages. First, the involved population is heterogeneous and findings may shed light on the effects of other chronic conflicts on children. Second, despite restriction to a small geographical area and small populations, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has had a substantial effect on the Middle-East and has fostered international interest, and has had a profound influence on relations between many western nations and the Arab world (Hahn, 2005). Understanding the impact of this conflict might shed light on the consequences of its continuation on the well-being of involved populations. As psychological distress has been documented as the link between exposure to conflict-related violence and the perpetuation of a conflict (Canetti, Elad-Strenger, Lavi, Guy, & Bar-Tal, 2015), understanding the magnitude of the psychological impact of exposure on the next generation is of great importance.

The study presented three hypotheses and two exploratory questions.

The first hypothesis predicted a moderate relation between severity of political violence exposure and psychological distress. This was based on the ecological model, which stresses the multi-level variety of factors that exert their influence on the individual. Because our aim in this hypothesis was to target the bi-variable relation exclusively, and not to address the additional factors that might come into play, we did not anticipate a strong relation. The second hypothesis predicted a moderate relation between the severity of political violence exposure in all three categories of exposure – direct, proximity and media exposure – and in all three categories of distress – psychological/emotional, behavior/functioning, and posttraumatic symptoms. The third hypothesis predicted a relation between severity of exposure and the three symptom categories – emotional, behavioral and post-traumatic.

The first exploratory question is whether the relations between the different exposure and symptom categories are of different magnitude. The second exploratory question is whether there is a moderating effect for population: Jewish Israelis, Arab Israelis, and Palestinians – such that there is a different magnitude of exposure-distress relation in the different groups. This moderating effect would express the role of group identification in the exposure – distress relation.

## 2. Method

The final sample of this meta-analysis included 20 studies, most of which were cross-sectional, generating 51 independent effects sizes. Most effects were for the Jewish Israeli population (26 effects) followed

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