

Invisible victims

Arab children suffer brunt of conflict in divided Israeli culture.

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" He doesn't trust me because I am an Israeli Arab, but I trust him," said Hassan Amer, director at Kenedy College in Israel, pointing to one of the leaders of the group of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip.

Almost 3 million Arabs live in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.

Another 1.5 million Arabs live alongside the 4.76 million Israelis in Israel. These Israeli Arabs appear to be largely invisible to the rest of the world.

Hassan was in Narni, Italy, this month at a conference on transcultural mental health organized by the World Psychiatric Association and attended by professionals from Mediterranean countries. Also in attendance were three people from the MU International Center for Psychosocial Trauma: Director Arshad Husain, Tim Galimore, a journalist, and me, a psychologist.

These Israeli Arabs are not in conflict with Israel and carry Israeli identification but mostly live in separate villages with separate schools for their children. They make up only 20 percent of the population, but because Arab women have twice as many children, their long-term impact on Israel might be significant. They are not going to remain invisible forever.

Most Jewish Israelis serve in the military but most Arabs do not, which means they are not eligible for housing loans or student fee exemptions. In addition they are discriminated against in public employment and higher education. Despite the fact that Arabs pay taxes, Arab schools are given 28 percent less than Jewish schools.

Hassan did not appear to be particularly angry about the situation in which he finds himself, but he indicated he worries about the effect the conflict in Israel is having on both Arabs and Israelis.

One study by Israeli psychiatrists found 25 percent of both Israeli and Arab school children have some level of post-traumatic-stress disorder, or PTSD. This is an indication that, regardless of religious or national orientation, there is no place for children to hide from the horrors of the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Hassan said it was a case of "the aggressor and the victims suffering together."

PTSD has a combination of symptoms that include sleep disturbances, hyperalertness and flashbacks. Besides PTSD, both groups of children show other behavior problems connected to the traumatic events they have seen. These symptoms include school misconduct, vandalism, frequent fighting and truancy. Data indicate academic underachievement is now higher, at 12 percent, than it was before the conflict flared in 2000.

Both groups show an increase in psychosomatic problems, and sexual acting out is now appearing in children as young as 13. The teachers having problems with aggressive students are asking mental health professionals such as Hassan for help in dealing with these problems.

The Iraq war had a more negative impact on the Arab children than on the Israeli children. Schools were closed the first day of the conflict, and for the next 20 days many children stayed home from school, fearful that the Americans might also attack them.

"To help, we have to involve all three groups: the parents, the teachers and the children," Hassan said. "Parents need education on the symptoms that show their children have problems. I am lecturing to parent and teacher groups about the symptoms of PTSD and how to get help."

Despite his message that if nothing is done PTSD can become chronic, few parents have gotten involved. "Parents say, 'Don't complicate my children.' They say it is just a stage and that their children will outgrow it.

" Muslim adults mostly believe that if you have problems, you go to the mufti," a religious man, "who because of his special relationship with Allah has healing powers. Many feel that if he simply lays his hands on you, you will get better." Forty percent of the teachers he has been in contact with, on the other hand, are taking the children's problems seriously, as are most of the students.

" Another one of our problems is the negative media about Muslims. In movies, when they appear, they are usually the villains," Hassan said. He dug out a report that listed many American movies that show Arabs as unusually lustful, and/or terrorists. He believes these negative images have affected Arab adults and teenagers and indirectly are helping to destroy children's positive attitudes toward themselves as Arabs.

One of the problems is to find ways of improving children's self-esteem. "We try to use a holistic approach with the children in which their religion is an important part. We start with the fact that they are religious and spiritual and that Allah has given them unique qualities."

Religion has become important partly because so much else has been taken away, but it was interesting to note that many psychotherapy techniques proven to be effective work well within a religious orientation. Hassan shared how he had incorporated positive self-talk, relaxation procedures, group support and reframing the problem in religious terms. Invisible or not to the rest of the world, it is obvious that these children are suffering the negative effects of an ongoing conflict. As the political situation in Israel resolves itself, these Israeli Arabs will become visible to the rest of the world.

Hassan has invited the University Hospital Trauma Center team to conduct trauma training in Israel, and the center is seriously looking into funding opportunities to accomplish this important task.

