

Written evidence submitted by Palestine Trauma Centre (UK) and UK Palestine Mental Health Network (IPC0093)

Palestine Trauma Centre (UK)

Company number: 6795059 Charity Commission number: 1133560

UK address: 4, Tanners Crescent, Hertford. SG13 8DS.

Website: <https://www.palestinetraumacentre.uk/>

UK Palestine Mental Health Network

Website: <https://ukpalmhn.com/>

This evidence to the Select Committee is submitted by David Harrold* and Gwyn Daniel** on behalf of two allied mental health organisations, each with deep roots in, and knowledge of the mental health challenges faced by Palestinians within the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

1 The Palestine Trauma (UK), based in Hertfordshire, was set up in 2010 to support a Mental Health team in Gaza Its Founder and Project Supervisor is Dr Mohamed Al Tawil who acts as the clinical supervisor for PTC (UK). Through him, a volunteer team of nine in the UK have regular contact with the Gaza Mental Health team and so this report is based on witnessed testimony from Gaza itself. David Harrold* is the Chair of Trustees

2 The UK Palestine Mental Health Network consists of psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists and allied Mental Health professionals, It aims to promote mental wellbeing, liberation, dignity and social justice for Palestinians and all peoples and societies. It is coordinated by a steering committee of qualified professionals and has one thousand, three hundred subscribers. Gwyn Daniel** is a member of the steering Committee of UKPMHN and a Patron of the Palestine Trauma Centre. She is a Consultant Family Therapist, Supervisor and Trainer and has many publications relating to Mental Health and Palestine.

3) Reasons for providing evidence

The evidence we present is primarily in response to Question 2
What can be learned from the record of UK Policies to date?

We wish to emphasise that a mental health perspective, rather than being peripheral to a wider political analysis, is key to understanding and anticipating outcomes at both individual and societal levels, especially in relation to the impacts of prolonged human rights abuses, violence, dehumanisation and racism.

Our particular expertise in relation to the ‘Israeli Palestine Conflict’ and the UK Government’s policies towards it is twofold:

- a) We understand the consequences of policy choices exercised by the UK government at both material and psychological levels. We analyse the rhetoric used by governments to justify their policies and the reverberations created for those parties most affected.
- b) We use our understanding of mental health and our deep connections with practitioners on the ground throughout Palestine to highlight those structural and systemic factors which constantly undermine the possibilities for Palestinians to live a normal, free and fulfilled life. We argue that ignoring the consequences of decades of military occupation, land appropriation, incarceration, intrusive surveillance and control on the West Bank, and of siege and the mass slaughter of civilians in Gaza, means that the factors which are essential to support a mentally healthy and viable Palestinian body politic are rarely addressed, still less insisted upon by Israel’s allies. Justice, dignity, agency and freedom are essential components for family and community recovery, as all previous conflicts have taught us. A population undergoing trauma of the magnitude we describe in the second section will require massive levels of support.

Failure to address the injustice that has been perpetrated against Palestinians will inevitably have wider consequences for the region.

In the first section of this evidence we refer to broader factors impacting upon the mental health of Palestinian citizens and the effect of some of the UK's policy decisions upon them. In the second section we provide direct evidence from the lived experience of Gazan citizens

4 The effects of UK Government Policies; what can be learnt?

The history of Britain's support for a Zionist state as embodied in the Balfour declaration of 1917 and operationalised through the mandate in Palestine from 1920 to 1948 is well known.ⁱ It forms the background to a position still evident today - that of virtually unconditional support for Israel and a corresponding reluctance to demonstrate any real commitment to the legitimate aspirations for Palestinian human rights and liberation.

We provide some examples here of policies from the previous and present governments which have direct effects on the experience of Palestinians and identify some key psychological dimensions reinforcing a continuing sense of betrayal by the UK.

4a) Power and powerlessness

UK government policy consistently fails to address the gross imbalance of power between Israel and Palestine. This is reflected in phrases such as 'both sides' and even this inquiry title: 'The Israel/Palestine conflict'. Examples of reluctance to address power imbalance include the failure of successive governments (including this one) to implement recognition of Palestine as a state, a move which would at least provide a boost for the Palestinian position.

Crucially, the failure to address power imbalance means ignoring the impact on Palestinians of the impunity granted to Israel by the USA and the UK, enabling Israel to continue to dominate and oppress them at every level. We know from mental health practice that powerlessness is a key component of trauma. On the West Bank, Palestinian parents are helpless to prevent their children being arrested at dead of night, or their land and villages being attacked by violent settlers. Protection from the law is rarely available and land appropriation is state sanctioned. Checkpoints mean that Palestinians cannot easily travel between their towns for work, education or visits, disrupting vital family bonds and restricting the social development of young people. In Gaza, citizens are utterly at the mercy of massive bombardments and lethal quadcopters. Gazans' impotence and humiliation was described by UN Secretary General Gutteres as being forced "to move like human pinballs across a landscape of destruction and death." ⁱⁱSuch levels of defencelessness have the capacity to disrupt vital human bonds – as when parents cannot protect their children - and to undermine the very fabric of society as when people are forced to fight over the meagre supplies of food. As we have seen in Gaza, in the rest of occupied Palestine, in the torture chambers of Sde Teiman, and in the massacres of Lebanese civilians, cruelty and sadism flourish in conditions of impunity. While the UK government has made limited reductions to arms sales, it continues to supply components for the F35 bombers which are wreaking such death and destruction on Gaza's defenceless citizens.

4b) Dehumanisation

Successive UK governments' determination, especially since October 7th 2023, to express empathy for only one people – Jewish Israelis – and to grant only them 'the right to defend themselves' has been accompanied by widespread dehumanisation of and racist narratives about Palestinians. Ministers in both governments have justified crimes against International Humanitarian Law such as the blocking of products necessary to sustain life.ⁱⁱⁱ Right now (December 2024)

Newborn babies are freezing to death while cold weather aid is being blocked.

Between October 7th and 12th, a week when Israeli flags were being flown from some UK government buildings, Israel dropped 6,000 bombs on the densely inhabited territory – equivalent to the total number of air strikes on Gaza during the entire 2014 war^{iv} There was zero condemnation of this from either government or opposition.

The citizens of Gaza take a keen interest in statements from the West and they know they have been effectively abandoned and reduced at best to the status of a ‘humanitarian case’. Experiences of dehumanisation and abandonment are two other key components exacerbating the already overwhelming trauma responses to fifteen months of relentless murderous onslaughts, displacement and starvation.

As well as being subjected to trauma, the experience of being dehumanised and violated carries the risk of perpetuating cycles of violence and vengeance. Our Mental Health experts in Gaza report that children’s play is increasingly violent, often inflicting real physical harm on each other. Children who experience their parents as incapable of protecting them and humiliated in front of them are likely to gravitate towards a movement that declares its intention of fighting back. Children and young people who witness or experience violations of the kind that Palestinians are routinely exposed to are likely to dehumanise others because their capacity for empathy is so compromised “...one of the impacts of trauma is it can close your heart, and when your heart is closed, you don't see the humanity of the other.” (Gabor Maté 2024)^v None of this should surprise us.

Only those who hold power have the capacity to step out of this destructive cycle, as occurred in South Africa. It cannot be demanded only of those subjected to state violence. There is no indication whatsoever of Israel being willing to do this but, more importantly

nor of its allies being willing to demand it of them. There is perhaps a belief among some in government circles that Israel must constantly be reassured, made to feel safe and secure if it is to make any concessions, but our psychological experience points to the opposite – that when no external boundaries are set and no restraints imposed on abusive and violent behaviour, the perpetrator is empowered and emboldened to pursue their own short term interests only, violating and dehumanising others. This is why it is essential that the government demonstrates unambiguous support for the processes and decisions of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

4c) Supporting Mental Health in Gaza

The question of how HM Government and its allies envisages a future for the people of Gaza vitally depends on acknowledging, not only the catastrophic loss of life and the damage inflicted on all of Gaza's homes, infrastructure, cultural institutions, hospitals and schools but the profound damage to the psyche, to intimate relationships and to social bonds.

Under their avowed aim of destroying Hamas, Israel, with the collusion of its allies, has stripped away all structures and systems which maintain order within the community, leaving a terrified population extremely vulnerable and deeply humiliated. This, together with Israel's proscription and dismantling of UNRWA which distributes aid and provides the schooling which is so precious to children's mental wellbeing has further depleted and debilitated the population. Nevertheless, mental health professionals on the ground, even amidst bombardment and displacement, are providing desperately needed psychological support. Concern for the future wellbeing of the community means that it is essential to "respect the organic efforts Gazans themselves are making and try to support

them” (Jabr 2024)^{vi} We have witnessed their amazing courage and resourcefulness.

However unpalatable HM Government may find Hamas, during its seventeen years of governance in Gaza many admirable projects have been operating to provide mental health support to the population. They are not connected in any way to Hamas but are trusted and respected by the communities they serve. They have suffered alongside those they help and share their cultural values. These local organisations must be supported and their capacity enhanced. Any attempt to undermine them and other community organisations in the furtherance of a new governance of Gaza will pose a profound risk to recovery. It will weaken the willingness of Gazans to engage with any help provided from an outside world that has so profoundly betrayed them.

Part Two. Evidence from Palestine Trauma Centre (UK).

The mental health specialists in Gaza use psychosocial methods to support children and families traumatised by conflict, destruction, siege and displacement. The UK team support this work with grants, academic links, training and online meetings.

Our most recent webinar with the Gaza team, emaciated from hunger, sitting in darkness and knowing they face death from bombardment now the West is distracted by Syria, was harrowing and left us realising that while we talk, the slaughter spreads.

Thanks to some eloquent reports from this team, we can gather a picture of life for this civilian population who neither caused nor wanted this war. It is important to start with the children whose traumas are multiple and whose future looks bleak. The team told us that their children constantly asked them questions they could not answer, and we suggested they note down these questions and send

them to us so that we could pass them on to 'the world' in so far as we could. Here are some of their questions:

“After we die, will I hear your voice?

بديش اموت أشلاء

I don't want to die in pieces

لمي ينزل الصاروخ علينا بنحس بوجع ولا بنموت علي طول

When a missile hits us, do we feel pain or die immediately?

لمي اموت بحطوني بالقبر عند بابا ولا ماما

When I die, will they put me in the grave with my mom and my dad?

لما تشتي الدنيا راح نغرق بالخيمة؟

When it rains, will we drown in the tent?

لما يقصفوا الخيمة راح ننحرق؟

When they bomb the tent, will we burn?

ليش دايمما بقصفونا؟

Why do they always bomb us?

نفسى أشوف حبة بندورة.

I wish I could see a piece of tomato.

بدي أروح على الجنة عشان هناك ما في خوف و لا حرب و فيها كل الحاجات

I want to go to heaven because there is no fear or war and it has everything.

الكلاب التي أكلت جثث الشهداء هل ستتحول إلى إنسان

Will the dogs that ate the dead bodies of the martyrs turn into humans?

هل تنبت للأطفال سيقان غير التي بُترت؟

Do children who have their legs amputated grow new legs?”

Every child has seen body parts along a road, witnessed death in many forms and heard muffled screams from under piles of immovable rubble. They have learnt to be ‘hyper-vigilant’ expecting bombs or sniper fire at any time. Chronic anxiety and hunger combine to produce shocking behaviour patterns: some children having suicidal thoughts, others turning violent. Going to bed at night is a fearful experience, because they believe they may never wake up. Many times during the night they do wake up. Screaming. Gaza has the highest per capita population of amputee children and orphans. A term in common use now is ‘Wounded Child No Surviving Family’. Our therapy team work every day using techniques learnt over ten years of alleviating the suffering of these children and building small communities of mutual support. But it is a losing battle in the face of starvation and constant bombardment.

Parents struggle to feed their families. A handful of flour can cost \$10. One egg costs \$2.50. Usable cash is scarce and sellers reject dirty money. In the recent floods, food supplies were washed away. Rats infest the tent areas and overnight they urinate on supplies of flour. Hepatitis is spreading and many infections are untreatable. Many mothers are too malnourished to feed their babies. Families who stay near the ruins of their home burn their furniture to keep warm or fuel a hastily built clay oven. Others follow orders to leave. Constant movement from one so-called safe zone to another maximises the stress and exhaustion in what is left of a family. Hunger, bombing, random shooting from quadcopter drones, the kidnapping and killing of medical personnel, displacement, disease, the destruction of educational and cultural places - all conspire to fulfil what the Palestinian population see as a deliberate intention: their own extermination.

Aid trucks wait outside the Rafah crossing. There are thousands of them, but only 30 a day are allowed in.^{vii} Everyone in our Gaza team knows that

Israel prevents these trucks entering and they are aware that Western governments abjectly fail to confront this deliberate withholding of food, water and medical supplies.^{viii} On 12 December 2024 Israel bombed an aid convoy at Khan Younis.^{ix} Still no reaction from those who have power to stop this. No reaction to images of people burning alive in tents bombed in the Al Mawasi camp. No reaction to the bombing of tower blocks that contain 20 or 30 members of one family. Our friends in Gaza wonder why they should bother to protest since no one in power seems to be listening. One area of destruction that has caused widespread horror are the cultural sites. Gaza had the highest literacy rates in the Middle East and everyone puts a high value on education. Now, surviving schools are refugee centres and all universities have been blown up. Gaza is one of the oldest cities in the world, inhabited continuously since the Bronze Age. There were Canaan, Egyptian, Roman, Greek, Byzantine and many other monuments on its territory, which represent thousands of years of heritage related to human settlement in these areas. Today, as one of our team writes, “this heritage is being destroyed in a barbaric way with a gluttony worthy of the radical Taliban. Where are the voices of outrage and condemnation? This is not only the history of Palestinians, but also the Global Heritage of Humanity.”

All of us at Palestine Trauma Centre (UK) are witnessing the deadly consequences of political inertia and cowardice in the face of evil. Debating terms like "genocide" waste time; we must do whatever is within our power to stop the destruction of a civilian population. Someday, all of us will be held accountable for what we allow or do not allow to happen. So far, government statements are out of tune with the reality live streamed on social media and described to us by our team in Gaza.

It only right to finish with words from Gaza, from Dr. Said Al-Kahlout, a mental health team member who is working with orphan children where he lives in tent camps. His own house has been destroyed. He sent this message to us on 13th December 2024.

“Within a single week, the El Kahlout family lost more than fifty martyrs. Among them was my sister’s family, now completely erased from the civil registry – parents, children, grandchildren – wiped away. This is how annihilation unfolds. And this is how we bite down on our wounds and move forward with life, distributing hope as we go. Perhaps God will protect those of us who remain and preserve what little is left to us: faith and reason.”

References

ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/22/palestine-britain-balfour-declaration-colonialism-uk-israeli-annexations>

ⁱⁱ <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sgsm22306.doc.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-keir-starmer-criticised-right-cut-gaza-water-power>

^{iv} [Gaza: Israel dropped hundreds of 2,000-pound bombs, analysis shows | CNN](#)

^v <https://www.transcend.org/tms/2024/10/gabor-mate-zionism-will-be-looked-upon-as-one-of-the-greatest-disasters-in-jewish-history>

^{vi} Jabr, S.,(2024), ‘Chronic traumatic stress disorder’: the Palestinian psychiatrist challenging western definitions of trauma, *The Guardian*, 14th April

^{vii} <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/media/press-releases/israel-government-continues-to-block-aid-response-despite-icj-genocide-court-ruling-says-oxfam/>

^{viii} <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-68177357>

^{ix} <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/12/israeli-drone-attack-on-gaza-aid-convoy-kills-12-as-hunger-crisis-deepens>