

Position Paper (6)

# A War without Human Rights

Psychological Consequences and  
Trauma of the Genocidal War on  
Persons with Disability

Jan, 2024

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### Psychological Consequences and Trauma of the Genocidal War on Persons with Disability

The effects of the genocidal war waged by the “Israeli” occupation are becoming more severe day after day since its fire first broke out on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, and has not subsided yet. The duration of the war on the Gaza Strip extends, exacerbating the suffering of the residents of the Strip, which has been going on for sixteen continuous years, forming the darkest face of the suffering of the Palestinian people extending throughout its history of struggle since the Nakba in 1948 until today. These effects worsen to become the most severe at various levels and the various aspects of the lives of the Palestinian people, including political, social, economic and psychological aspects.

Today, after more than 111 days have passed since the start of the war that has taken the lives of 26071 male and female martyrs, and resulted in the injury of 68088 citizens<sup>1</sup>. more than half of the wounded individuals might be at risk of developing disabilities as a result of these injuries, and as a result of the collective punishment policy imposed by the occupation on the residents of the Gaza Strip, which deprives them of the medicines and medical equipment necessary to deal with these injuries, as the occupation uses starvation and deprivation of medicines as a tool of war against civilians in the Gaza Strip<sup>2</sup>. The number of displaced citizens in the Gaza Strip has reached 2 million people throughout the Strip<sup>3</sup>, most of whom were displaced more than once, reaching up to five or six times since the beginning of the war, in search for safety that does not exist today in the Strip in light of the increasing pace of crimes committed by the occupation army using land, air and sea weapons at the same time.

Restrictions imposed on the Gaza Strip are increasing significantly, as goods and commercial trucks are prevented from entering the Strip, and there is a very limited entry of humanitarian aid which is considered trivial compared to the huge need of the population, in addition to the Israeli occupation’s continued weaponizing of prevention of water as a tool of war, which is pushing the Gaza Strip into the largest humanitarian crisis in recent history. Not only that, amid all this, most of the Strip’s hospitals and primary health

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<sup>1</sup> “The Israeli Occupation’s Aggression on Palestine since 07/10/2023 – Last update 24/01/2024 at 12:00”, *The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics*, (24 January 2024). Website: <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps>.

<sup>2</sup> “100 Days of Genocide War on The Gaza Strip”. *PWWSO* (14 Jan 2024). Website: <https://n9.cl/38kiq>.

<sup>3</sup> *The Israeli Occupation’s Aggression*, previously mentioned

care centers are out of service<sup>4</sup> due to the depletion of fuel and the partial or complete destruction of most hospitals since the beginning of the military operations launched by the occupation army, all this comes along with having the only psychiatric hospital in the Gaza Strip out of service after being damaged in an airstrike on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 2023<sup>5</sup>, which means the cessation of all health services, including mental health services as well.

Persons with disabilities, including women and girls, face more complex aspects of suffering. The levels of difficulties they face increase in light of the destruction of infrastructure and the lack of accessibility of the places for their needs, in addition to the difficulty of movement and mobility, and the extremely difficult conditions of displacement; not to mention the increase in the severity of disabilities for many individuals, and the joining of large numbers of injured people as a result of this war to people with disabilities. Reports estimate that around one thousand children have been subject to limb amputation during this war<sup>6</sup>, which creates more complex challenges represented by the new reality of disability on the one hand, and the tragic living conditions that prevail in the Strip as a result of the aggression on the other hand, in addition to the fact that these experiences have a double impact on male and female children, as they are less able to comprehend these experiences in light of their reduced knowledge about them compared to adults, which weakens their ability to adapt to such conditions<sup>7</sup>.

This is clearly evident in the results of the survey conducted by the Stars of Hope Society (SHS) and the Social and Economic Policies Monitor (Al Marsad) about the conditions of persons with disabilities and injured children with disabilities. Preliminary percentages of the survey of the needs of children accessed until now indicate that 68% of the children see that providing appropriate shelter is a priority at present, additionally, 61% of the children see that providing covers and mattresses is a priority, while 26% indicate that psychosocial intervention services are a priority<sup>8</sup>, this percentage is considered high and remarkable in light of the current conditions, in which the priorities of war victims are usually providing basic survival needs.

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<sup>4</sup> 100 Days of genocide, previously mentioned.

<sup>5</sup> "World Health Organization confirms that the only psychiatric hospital in Gaza has stopped operating". *Anadolu Agency*. (9 November 2023). Website: <https://n9.cl/jz2xj>.

<sup>6</sup> "UNICEF: Again, Gaza is the most dangerous place in the world for children". (1 December 2023). Website: <https://n9.cl/isuap>.

<sup>7</sup> "Severe war trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder in adolescents with sensory impairments: a cross-sectional study". *Khuzama Hijal Shaar*. (2013). Website: <https://n9.cl/856i7l>.

<sup>8</sup> An unpublished report: The Preliminary Results of the Monitoring for the Needs of Disabled and Injured Children in the Gaza Strip during the War of 2023-2024 (Ramallah: Stars of Hope Society for the Empowerment of Women with Disabilities and the Social and Economic Policies Monitor, 2024).

These indicators warn of severe effects that will be added to the historical impacts of the colonial occupation on the Palestinian people, on several levels, including negative psychological effects, the signs of which have begun to appear among Palestinian men and women in the Gaza Strip. This war will certainly leave lasting impacts that cannot be denied or ignored, as the features of these impacts become clear by looking at the experiences of people who have gone through similar events and incidents, which extended even after the end of the state of war in which they lived, and there were different forms and multiple philosophies for dealing with these effects.

### **The Experience of 75 Years between Psychological Steadfastness/ Resilience and Flexibility and Psychological Suffering:**

When tracing the history of the Palestinian cause, it is evident that the practices of apartheid, genocide, and brutal killing practiced by the occupation today are not strange or far from imaginable. The occupation has, over the 75 years of its occupation of Palestine, committed many of the most horrific massacres known in modern history, and practiced various forms of oppression and attempts at humiliation against Palestinians, evidence of which still exists to demonstrate the brutality of this occupation. Many reports document the practices of the occupation, its massacres, and its racist policies, such as the massacre of Dair Yasin, the massacre of Yazour, the massacre of Tiberias, the massacre of Albraij, and the massacre of the Ibrahimi Mosque<sup>9</sup>... in addition to other massacres committed against the people of Palestine since before the Nakba until today.

These massacres are accompanied by the policies of humiliation and submission that are committed in different forms, either on roadblocks in villages and cities, during raids, or in prisons against male and female prisoners. This is in addition to the fragmentation policy that the "Israeli" occupation deliberately practices towards Palestinians, which resulted in creating mini-communities, each of which living under certain challenges related to the reality imposed by the occupation, in an attempt to divide the Palestinian whole and impose a situation in which it can deal with each part alone, and to link each part to its challenges, away from thinking about the collective dimension of the Palestinian people as a whole.

Since the beginning of the Palestinian cause starting from the Nakba of 1948, Palestinians have drawn many portraits of honorable resistance, where the history of the Palestinian struggle, which dates back to the

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<sup>9</sup> "The Israeli Massacres" *Wafa*. (20 January 2024). Website: <https://2u.pw/6cRjmmmy>.

beginning of the Nakba and refuge experience in 1948, has crystallized through many stages that portrayed features of resilience and resistance despite the continuous attempts of the occupation to suppress and kill the spirit of resistance and solidarity among the Palestinian people through many punitive that it imposed. This is not considered out of the ordinary for the Palestinian people as one of the colonized people. The experiences of colonized people are similar, even in their awareness of their strengths and the creation of resilience tools and mechanisms, and the innovation of means that lead to them. Frantz Fanon points out that the colonized people realize that "the substance of village assemblies the cohesion of people's committees, and the extraordinary fruitfulness of local meetings and groupments. Henceforward the interest of one will be the interest of all".<sup>10</sup>

Palestinians have formed many forms of psychological steadfastness and resilience, and have developed their tools, which emerged in all stages of the Palestinian resistance. For example, when contemplating the popular education experience that has spread with the break of the first Intifada, it highlights the meanings of resilience and strength that the Palestinians gained through this process<sup>11</sup>. Not only that, but the experience of the popular committees that spread during that period had the most prominent role in community organizing and resistance mobilization, and providing a socially nurturing environment for all members of society through the values of solidarity that prevailed in society at that time. These images and other scenes through which Palestinian society strengthened the tools of psychological steadfastness/ resilience and flexibility, which stand out clearly in the face of the various colonial tools of oppression used by the occupation authorities against the Palestinians.

Additionally, the collective national identity that Palestinians form and present is closely related to the high levels of psychological flexibility and increases their ability to withstand the punitive measures that the occupation imposes on them. Ibrahim Makkawi explains this phenomenon by saying that collective psychological trauma cannot be confronted with individual tools, as the experience that the Palestinians are going through in its various forms, and the variety of tools of oppression used against them, are all done for a collective reason, which is that they are Palestinians. The Palestinian identity of every Palestinian constitutes

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<sup>10</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963): 47.

<sup>11</sup> Ibrahim Makkawi. "Towards decolonizing community psychology: Insights from the Palestinian colonial context". *Frontiere Di Comunita: Complessita a confronto* (2017): 7-33.

the main factor in being targeted by the brutal practices of the occupation, which requires awareness of this collective self to form tools to confront these shocks.

Moreover, another tool for enhancing psychological resilience and steadfastness among Palestinians is creating and giving meaning to various experiences of psychological suffering<sup>12</sup>. This contributes to the formation of psychological readiness to face this suffering and transform its impact into a driving motivation for continuity. Lina Meari points out the formation of meaning among the Palestinian people by saying, “For example, the family’s loss of a son is linked to a meaning greater than the loss itself, which is a project of resistance and liberation.”<sup>13</sup>

Meanings of psychological resilience and flexibility and overcoming the negative effects of bitter experiences that the Palestinian people have gone and are going through are also derived from their belief, not only in the right and legitimacy of their resistance but also from their religious faith. The belief in individuals’ deep-rooted beliefs, such as belief in fates, enhances the ability to overcome shocks and can mitigate their potential negative effects, rather, it can constitute a factor in achieving psychological harmony and satisfaction<sup>14</sup>, which have emerged and been strengthened throughout the Palestinian experience in multiple forms.

The formation of this psychological resilience and flexibility is not only linked to the period of being under occupation, rather, the Palestinian history is full of popular tools that enhance collective solidarity, since the Palestinian society is essentially a collective society. This can be explained by the concept of “Owna (aid)”, which means Palestinians supporting each other on various occasions and circumstances<sup>15</sup>. “Owna”, which on its own represents a framework for the community support that the Palestinian society provides to its people, and is not limited to financial support, but extends to include moral support as well, forms one of the tools of resistance and resilience during the different stages of occupation. This practice was widespread in the first and second Intifada and even before and after them, as camp residents shared food among themselves, women

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> An interview with Lina Meari – Assistant Professor in Birzeit University. Conducted on: 18 January 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Amani Abu Suboh, Master’s Thesis: *The Role of Palestinian Collective Identity in Achieving Psychological Adjustment for Individuals following the Trauma Resulting from Exposure to Military Aggression*. (Birzeit: Birzeit University, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Aisha Mansour, “Owna before The Neoliberal Economy”. Dalia Association (20 January 2024). Website: <https://2u.pw/flf2MnH>.

gathered in the homes of the martyrs and prisoners, relatives took care of their children, and many other examples that continue to this day.<sup>16</sup>

What is also remarkable about this experience is that despite the occupation's attempts to impose different challenges and a different reality for each Palestinian part, these practices were unable to subjugate the Palestinian people and erase their collective identity. Evidence of this appears in many cases, especially when the punitive measures become stricter, such as the war being waged today. Meari says, "This psychological pain resulting from the ongoing colonial project since the end of the last century, is the same thing that has turned into a kind of psychological strength resulting from what the Palestinians experienced, and this pain began to carry many meanings and symbolisms that urge the Palestinian to remain steadfast... These are the meanings associated with the homeland, resistance, and Jihad."<sup>17</sup>

### **Forms of Violations and Difficulties Experienced by the Palestinian People in General and Persons with disabilities in Particular:**

The current war being waged on Gaza is causing the escalation of suffering to unprecedented levels for the population of the Gaza Strip. In light of the interruption of water, electricity, fuel, and communications, the scarcity of resources, humanitarian aid, medicines, and medical supplies, the difficult weather conditions, the deliberate destruction of civilian buildings and infrastructure, and even the targeting of shelters and shelter centers represented by UNRWA schools, the suffering of the displaced residents of the Gaza Strip is increasing, and the difficulties faced by people with disabilities, in particular, are aggravated, as they face greater difficulties in evacuating, in accessing basic needs, and in coexisting with the new reality imposed on them in light of the lack of any of the necessities of life for them as persons with disabilities<sup>18</sup>.

In a report issued by Human Rights Watch, displaced persons with disabilities described the terror that they felt during the process of displacement after they were forced to leave their homes and their assistive tools and equipment, such as wheelchairs, walking tools, and hearing aids. Furthermore, they expressed their concerns

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<sup>16</sup> Johnny Mansour et. al., "70 Years of UNRWA: Palestinian Refugees from a Comprehensive View". (Palestinian Return Centre and Aljazeera Centre for Studies). Website: <https://2u.pw/5xYBGuE>

<sup>17</sup> Meari, previously mentioned.

<sup>18</sup> "Gaza: The Devastating Effect of the Attacks and Siege by the Israeli Side on Persons with Disabilities" *Human Rights Watch*, (1 November 2023). Website: <https://cutt.us/NGC1b>.

about their lack of access to basic medicines, in addition to their presence in overcrowded shelter centers, whose residents suffer from a scarcity of water, food, and sanitation facilities<sup>19</sup>.

The matter does not stop there. Iyad Krunz, the Stars of Hope Society Gaza office Manager, points out that the catastrophic conditions for persons with disabilities are becoming more complex in light of the additional difficulties imposed on everyone due to the current war, as “it is not only about approved shelter centers anymore... People are taking refuge in the street...there are tents everywhere and they are not registered with any party, which makes the residents of these tents responsible for meeting their needs by themselves...no one cares about them...even in the displacement centers officially affiliated with UNRWA, currently, meals are only served twice a week!!”<sup>20</sup>

Krunz indicated “No one can imagine the level of needs today in the Strip... Garbage bags, which may be considered always available and taken for granted, are missing today in Gaza, which means additional difficulty for persons with disabilities, especially physical disabilities, as they are forced to use fixed bathroom seats<sup>21</sup>, which require a garbage bag for every use... You can imagine what it means if these bags are not available in general for persons with disabilities, and especially for women with disabilities!”<sup>22</sup>

These complex difficulties become greater for parents with disabilities, who expressed these difficulties through the interviews that the SHS and Al Marsad conducted with a group of women and persons with disabilities to monitor the effect of the current war on them. A displaced woman with a disability said “I need anything, even only a blanket to cover my son...”<sup>23</sup>, another woman added: “I fear for my children, for example, if they go alone to the bathroom or any place far away from me”, while another woman said, “All I think about is how to provide food for my girls... My husband and I do not eat or drink, all we worry about are our daughters<sup>24</sup>”. In an interview with a father with a physical disability, he said, “When we were bombed, I started crying. Everyone around me was running, and I stood there and felt my disability. Two of my children were missing, and I did not know what to do or how to look for them...”<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> An interview with Iyad Krunz, Stars of Hope Society Gaza office manager conducted on: 16 January 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Chairs designed to be an alternative to sanitary units (toilet), consisting of open seats that require garbage bags that are fixed to the chair and used once. They are used in displacement centers and tents for people with disabilities and others.

<sup>22</sup> An interview with Iyad Krunz, previously mentioned.

<sup>23</sup> An interview with a woman with disability in refugee shelters, conducted on 19 November 2023.

<sup>24</sup> An interview with a woman with disability, conducted on 29 November 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Gaza: The Devastating Effect of Attacks and Siege, previously mentioned.

Feelings of helplessness, confusion, fear, extreme anxiety, as well as lack of sleep and hunger appear as part of the reality imposed by this war, which creates a more difficult experience for persons with disabilities, as is evident from the above interviews. This, of course, may lead to negative psychological effects on them more than others, as their usual lifestyle - despite its difficulty - in one way or another distances them from many of the factors that cause psychological trauma. This is due to the “protected” lifestyle that most persons with disabilities live in on the one hand, in addition to the exclusion, marginalization, and weak participation in public life to which they are exposed as a result of the poor availability of accessibility measures and infrastructure on the other hand, in addition to the different meanings of experiences and what they may mean for persons with disabilities<sup>26</sup>.

These factors play a role in reducing the direct exposure of persons with disabilities to traumatic events, which negatively affects the building of psychological adaptation and resilience factors<sup>27</sup>. This necessarily means that they will face more severe effects when exposed to very difficult events. We can sense this in the reality of the situation in the Gaza Strip, as the experiences and fears of persons with disabilities revolved around the loss of basic support due to the martyrdom of parents or relatives, the loss of assistive devices, the difficulty of adaptation, and social isolation due to the lack of appropriate and suitable places for their special requirements. Thareef ALGhorra says “Many persons with disabilities preferred to remain in the north in places they already knew rather than face an uncertain fate in the event of displacement”<sup>28</sup>.

### **The War of October 7<sup>th</sup>: Multiple forms of violations and escalation lead to an increase in the severity of the psychological impact on the collective and individual levels:**

In light of the deteriorating reality in the Gaza Strip, which led to the worsening of conditions day after day, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip became victims of the negligence of the international community and its procrastination to take real practical steps to change the reality of the situation, until going back to the previous pre-war situation, which was already difficult, became a distant prospect<sup>29</sup>. These catastrophic conditions increase the psychological and social pressures on the residents of the Gaza Strip, including persons with

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<sup>26</sup> *Severe war trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder in adolescents*, previously mentioned.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> An interview with Thareef ALGhorra, Head of the Disabilities Representative Persons Network in Gaza, conducted on 19 November 2023.

<sup>29</sup> “The War on Gaza: Everyone is Neglected,” *ESCWA* (November 2023). Website: <https://cutt.us/oY8aR>

disabilities, and these effects are expected to continue until after the end of the war. In an interview with Dr. Samah Jaber<sup>30</sup>, she mentioned: “This war will have enormous and painful psychological impacts on the residents of the Gaza Strip, and that these impacts will extend for a long time, even after the end of the military operations.”<sup>31</sup>

International reports indicate that all children and women in the Gaza Strip have been exposed to all types of psychological disorders due to the aggression, which results in negative effects on their psychological and social health. These effects, according to the reports, include deteriorating mental health, high rates of anxiety and depression, weak social relationships, and difficulty adapting to the new situation<sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, a report issued by CARE International mentioned that psychological trauma in the Gaza Strip has reached unprecedented levels, due to the continuous bombing and the fear felt by citizens. The report also indicated that children are having an increasing fear of dying at any moment<sup>33</sup>.

Additionally, the fact that the majority of the residents of the Gaza Strip are trapped in poverty, destitution, and hunger as a result of the conditions of displacement, and the loss of everything as a result of the bombing that affected all forms of life in the Gaza Strip, including economic activity, leads to more suffering and increasing pressure, which appears in the form of a deterioration in psychological health and the appearance of symptoms and signs of psychological disorders associated with such conditions including anxiety disorders, depression, loss of appetite and speech disorders in children, poor social relationships, anger and violence, and other negative psychological effects on the people of the Gaza Strip, which can also be reflected in physical effects and symptoms such as headaches, stomach pain, rapid heartbeat, and insomnia<sup>34</sup>.

The conditions of persons with disabilities are not any better under these circumstances; persons with disabilities face prolonged psychological distress as a result of the “Israeli” siege on Gaza which has been going on for more than sixteen years, during which it adopted a policy of depriving persons with disabilities of many of the elements of inclusion as a result of the stifling control and siege it imposes on all goods, products, and tools entering the Strip. From the beginning, the concerns of persons with disabilities were having to relive the

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<sup>30</sup> Consultant Psychiatrist and Director of Mental Health Services at the Palestinian Ministry of Health.

<sup>31</sup> “How Do the People of Gaza Suffer from the Psychological Effects of War?” *BBC*. (4 January 2024). Website: <https://2u.pw/qR4EoPy>.

<sup>32</sup> “The Commission’s Press Conference Statement on the suffering of women in light of the Israeli military aggression against the Gaza Strip”, *The Independent Commission for Human Rights*, (6 January 2024). Website: <https://n9.cl/bc7wx>.

<sup>33</sup> “7 things you need to know about the humanitarian situation in Gaza” *Care International*. (19 December 2023). Website: <https://2u.pw/yOCiUuS>.

<sup>34</sup> *100 Days of genocide*, previously mentioned.

traumatic experiences from previous wars, including the inability to flee and the fear of a future attack. The current bombing and blockade have already exacerbated the negative mental health effects on civilians in Gaza, including persons with disabilities<sup>35</sup>. Their worst fears were realized, but with the highest possible degree of horror, as everyone was being targeted indiscriminately and as a result of the destruction of most of the Gaza Strip's buildings.

Krunz says: "This war is different from the previous wars, as previous wars targeted certain areas... This time, the whole Gaza Strip is being targeted... The number of displaced people is very huge, and the extent of need doubles every moment... The psychological burden is building up among persons with disabilities daily due to the recurring displacements and the difficulty of the surrounding conditions... The feeling of helplessness and the feeling that they are a burden on their families in light of the lack of privacy, the lack of transportation, and the destruction of infrastructure... Persons with disabilities face a state of confusion and uncertainty that becomes more difficult and its mental impact increases as time goes on... All the difficulties that persons with disabilities face contribute to the aggravation of psychological harm on them."<sup>36</sup>

The effects of war on persons with disabilities increases and the psychological consequences associated with these effects become more severe, as the needs of persons with disabilities are non-prioritized, even though they were not even a priority in normal circumstances. This leads to making persons with disabilities exposed to more painful psychological experiences as a result of their disabilities. From the testimonies of the displaced, it is evident that the assistive devices of persons with disabilities are used to meet other needs of families in light of the inability of persons with disabilities to benefit from them appropriately. Wheelchairs, for example, are no longer of value in streets filled with rubble, and in sandy displacement areas<sup>37</sup>. Persons with intellectual disabilities also face difficult psychological experiences in light of indiscriminate bombing and intense fear. In an interview with a woman with a disability, she stated that during the days of the war, she saw the families of persons with intellectual disabilities giving their children sleeping pills and sedatives to control the states of fear and panic to which they are exposed<sup>38</sup>.

Women with disabilities went through painful experiences that can be considered the most complex experiences in light of the genocidal war that aimed at the extermination of "life" in the Gaza Strip. One woman

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<sup>35</sup> Gaza: *The Devastating Impact of the Attacks*, previously mentioned.

<sup>36</sup> *An interview with Iyad Al-Krunz*, previously mentioned.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> An interview with a woman with disability, conducted on 29 November 2023.

with disability says: “This is the worst experience anyone can have... the experience exceeds our comprehension capacity. In this war, I lost my husband and my home, and I am now displaced in UNRWA shelters with my child... I do not feel safe and I cannot give him a feeling of security. My child is afraid all the time and has panic attacks and I do not know how to deal with him...simply because I do not know how to deal with these feelings of mine, so how will I deal with what my child is going through?”<sup>39</sup> ... Another woman with disability says “My pain for my child was greater than my pain for myself when I initially faced difficulty when leaving the house during the bombing. My child was crying and saying, “I will not leave you alone, I cannot live without you.”<sup>40</sup>

International organizations shed light on the psychological conditions of the citizens of the Gaza Strip and pointed out the urgent psychological interventions that must be implemented, in a report issued by CARE International, in which it also indicated that psychologists and social workers are trying to assist residents facing trauma<sup>41</sup>. Other reports point out the depth of the shock and predict the worst psychological impacts that could appear after the end of the war. On the same matter, a report issued by UNRWA indicated that it worked to provide psychological first aid services, social support, and other specialized protection services for the displaced. The report indicates that UNRWA provides psychological and social support services to 101,211 displaced people in its shelters, in addition to the presence of a social support team consisting of 284 school counselors in these shelters, who work to provide support to the displaced<sup>42</sup>. However, this is not sufficient nor effective, as the priority of international organizations must focus on protecting civilians and stopping military aggression against them, as any psychological intervention carried out will be erased the moment a nearby bombing occurs, it is a huge psychological reserve of daily terror.

At the same time, presenting and narrating these experiences through the lens of “trauma” may reduce the broad scope of the experience, as it constitutes dealing with the feelings and behaviors that may appear after wars as symptoms of psychological and neurological disorders only, without realizing the fact that this war comes within an experience extending throughout history, from the colonial reality and resistance to this reality, which had multidimensional effects on the Palestinian people. The interaction of war experiences with the experiences of individuals, their context, and their psychological structures, which are formed within an

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<sup>39</sup> An interview with a woman with disability, conducted on 18 January 2024.

<sup>40</sup> An interview with a woman with disability, conducted on 27 November 2023.

<sup>41</sup> “Gaza: Emotional scars will last a lifetime”. *Care International*. (16 November 2023). Website: <https://2u.pw/fy38Axxw>

<sup>42</sup> “UNRWA Report No. 51 on the Conditions in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem)”. *UNRWA* (13 December 2023). Website: <https://n9.cl/tkrgyp>.

intertwined mixture of conflict resulting from the oppression of colonial powers and confronting this oppression, and the meanings and framings that this produces for the different feelings around these experiences, in a way that does not deny these feelings, but rather creates mechanisms and tools for recognizing and dealing with them as an essential part of the resistance experience on the psychological level.

This makes us realize that linking this war to the duality of the traumatic event and psychological trauma as a diagnosis method as seen by traditional clinical psychology becomes a reduction that seriously needs to be reviewed. What is absent from this diagnosis method is the recognition of societies and their multiple and intersecting experiences, in which pain, pride, resistance, steadfastness, and other concepts are intertwined, which can be understood from a broader perspective if we remove them from the duality of the traumatic event and psychological trauma, which constitute this experience on the individual and collective levels. This perspective can contribute to producing more realistic perceptions of the needs of war victims and persons with disabilities.

### **Which Psychological Interventions Meet the Needs of Palestinians in the Strip:**

We must consider Palestinian history, which shapes the context that we cannot interpret and analyze the current events and their implications without, as this indicates that it is necessary to understand the experience within the context of the Palestinians' subjection to colonial settler occupation for many decades, to be able to provide mechanisms and services that enhance mental health for various groups in a manner that takes into account the requirements of Palestinians at both the collective and individual levels.

Looking at many international and other reports that dealt with previous wars and the current war on the Gaza Strip can guide us to conclude the individualistic-capitalist approach in explaining the psychological effects of this war, especially by international organizations. This approach focuses on two basic dimensions: the first is the presence of a traumatic event and the second is the diagnosis of trauma or its framing in the form of what is called "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)", without considering the fact that this traumatic event is military-political violence practiced against colonized people, and without highlighting any historical connection and a context that extend over many decades.

This is also reflected in the form of interventions that are being called for to be provided, in addition to the nature of the grants provided by these parties for providing psychological services for the residents of the Gaza

Strip, within the prevailing models of intervention, which are essentially built on a prior diagnostic assumption that there is a high probability of the spread of post-traumatic stress disorder among the population of the Gaza Strip, and without taking into account Palestinian national priorities in general, which presents to us the problem related to identifying the priorities of society and the context of the event that must be discussed.

This problem lies in constructing psychological intervention in a way that does not take into account the historical Palestinian experience and the tools that the Palestinian people have formed and developed in terms of adaptation and steadfastness within this experience, and not acknowledging that these considerations constitute the basis for the form and design of any intervention, which necessarily means turning a blind eye to the requirements of the situation, and the continuation of offering services and psychological grants and interventions that are confined to individualism and traditional therapeutic interventions, ignoring the collective experience of the Palestinian society. This neglect, which affects all people who were subjected to colonialism and are still suffering from its effects, has always had historical roots represented in the “white supremacy” ignoring the culture of indigenous people, the subject of stereotyping per the perceptions of this “white supremacy”, which resides in the mentality of donors today.

The events we witness today place psychological interventions that are based on the liberation phase that the Palestinian people are living within its priorities, to improve the current living reality and mitigate the negative effects resulting from the war, and to progress psychological interventions to an indigenous societal level that constitutes an important part of the process of liberation from the “Israeli” occupation. Meari says: “The Palestinian situation and treatment cannot be dealt with using an individualistic approach. First, one must understand the nature of the forms, practices, and structures of the oppression to which the Palestinian people are exposed, and thus the psychological effects of these structures on the “self” level”.<sup>43</sup>

This is confirmed by Frantz Fanon in a paradox about the individualistic approach which promotes the individual and believes that an individual must assert and strengthen himself/herself, however, the colonized must realize the corruption of this theory and look into the forms of organizing the popular struggle, which will provide him/her with a new language and a new understanding<sup>44</sup>. This vision contributes fundamentally to directing interventions towards societal sources and believing in them as an essential tool in restoring the self, overcoming negative psychological effects, and even reversing them as a driving force towards liberation.

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<sup>43</sup> Meari, previously mentioned.

<sup>44</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, previously mentioned.

This invites us to reshape the view towards the role of psychology, its interventions, and practices in Palestinian society, starting from a deeper collective analysis that is more related to the realities of the oppressed people. An analysis that takes into consideration the complex power relationships and oppressive practices of the colonial power, both visible and hidden, which govern the formation of these psychological effects at the individual level. Not only that, but it must also take into consideration the context and form of the society, its points of strength, and the mechanisms that it has developed as part of its ongoing struggles with these powers<sup>45</sup>. In this context, Shadi Jaber sees that “Interventions must focus on how the community can support itself and be a source of support and an incubator for its members.... The focus must be on strengthening Palestinian societal ways of recovering and healing.”<sup>46</sup>

We cannot say that there are specific successful interventions that must be adopted in treating the trauma resulting from the current war, as this shock is not a result of the moment, and the end of the war will not be a post-traumatic phase. The Palestinian trauma is an ongoing collective trauma that will continue as long as the occupation exists as Makkawi points out<sup>47</sup>. This means that we will fail if we do not work to change our approach to working on psychological intervention, and this necessarily means the failure of any intervention that does not take liberation from colonialism as its compass, which also applies to persons with disabilities as part of the formation of the Palestinian people, and considering their requirements in the context of strengthening their resilience and their presence as part of this process and as an essential partner in it as well.

We affirm our position on the necessity of providing psychological interventions in the current stage, which constitutes an urgent need. Developing psychological interventions that are appropriate for this situation requires that those working on designing interventions be free from funding restrictions in designing interventions, and to be free from the conventional form of psychological intervention and services, and any individual cognitive frameworks, and to draw these interventions from the reality of the Palestinian situation and history, which is full of reliable sources of power that can be depended on, in addition to the experiences of people with shared experiences. The healing process (so to speak) is a collective process and cannot be separated from the political reality of the Palestinian people. Therefore, it is important to frame the

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<sup>45</sup> *Ignacio Martin-Baro writings for a Liberation Psychology* (Harvard: Harvard University, 1994).

<sup>46</sup> An Interview with Shadi Jaber – An Expert in the Field of Psychological Health, conducted on 21 January 2024.

<sup>47</sup> *Towards decolonizing community psychology*, previously mentioned.

psychological pain resulting from the war within the framework of the Palestinian collective event and to give priority to benefitting from various societal sources when designing interventions.

We also find it necessary to expand the study and investigation of the psychological and emotional effects resulting from the genocidal war in the Gaza Strip, including its effects on persons with disabilities, as a more marginalized and less adaptive segment of the society, as we have previously explained, so that psychological interventions are based on the collective Palestinian experience, and the shared experiences of persons with disabilities, in a manner that contributes to the development of psychological interventions that address the psychological effects, traumas, and psychological repercussions on generations of Palestinians.

The genocidal war will remain a part of the collective memory of the Palestinian people, and its effects cannot be easily reversed or erased from a society that tries every hour to survive death by bombing, hunger, or cold. Therefore, we believe that collectively treating these experiences, sharing them, and finding ways to mitigate their impacts, by deriving therapeutic methods and means based on a collective perspective that seeks to liberate the load of pain that has accumulated for decades, in addition to the pain and wounds of this war, is the best way to start.