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Psychological opinion

Psychoactive is a group of practising and academic mental health professionals who are active in areas of social and political concern, particularly in regards to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict.¹¹⁷ In preparation of the Report, DCI-Palestine provided a group within Psychoactive, who are currently investigating the issue of military detention of Palestinian minors, with 15 randomly selected testimonies relied on by the Report for the purpose of obtaining an insight into some of the psychological effects on children of being held in the Israeli military detention system. The full psychological opinion will be available on Psychoactive's website, with a summary presented below:



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Organisation:	Psychoactive-Mental Health Professionals for Human Rights
Sample:	15 testimonies
Age range:	9-17
Date:	March 2012

1. From the testimonies it emerges that from the moment of an often traumatic night time arrest, the child or youth is cut off from family, from everyday life, and we suspect that in many ways, from the experience of himself as he was before. We learn from the testimonies that the boys are alone and often exposed to violence, and thus to fear, physical and psychic pain, as well as to a chain of experiences which are likely to give rise to disorientation, humiliation, and helplessness, all the more so once having witnessed the helplessness, and perhaps also the fear, of their parents.
2. The boys' descriptions of the conditions leading up to the interrogation and the way in which the interrogations are conducted cast serious doubts as to the credibility of the confessions extracted as suggested in the PHR-Israel report, dated May 2011.¹¹⁸ But more importantly, exposure to such potentially traumatic events is liable to have lasting debilitating psychological and physiological effects.
3. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a potentially traumatizing event is one in which an individual experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others and in which the individual's response involved intense fear, helplessness or horror. Lack of control in painful and distressing situations is known to engender feelings of intense helplessness which is one of the factors in causing trauma. The arrests and interrogations as described in the boys' testimonies are potentially traumatic events, and in many of the testimonies a sense of helplessness and horror is evident.
4. Since most of the statements were taken while the boy was still in detention, within a short time from the arrest and interrogation, only short term effects are described in the testimonies. However, the concentration and severity of potentially traumatic events described in the testimonies raises the likelihood that these boys may suffer lasting psychological traumatisation which may result in the impairment of important areas of daily functioning, at home, at school and with their peers. Even without considering PTSD, there may be emotional and psychosomatic reactions, such as difficulties in falling asleep, nightmares, bedwetting, increased startle response, difficulties in concentrating, loss of interest, loss of self worth, anxiety disorders and depression.

5. Family support is very important in contributing to the child's sense of safety, which is likely to have been severely damaged during the arrest and detention. Such support is mostly denied by restricting the families' visits while the boys are in detention. In addition, after their release the children and youth will return to a home that in many ways is no longer the safe haven it had been and to parents whose authority and dignity is likely to have been damaged, who presumably suffer a great deal of guilt at not having been able to protect their child, and whose ability to help the youths process their experiences and recover their psychic equilibrium may, therefore, be severely handicapped.
6. It is striking that emotions are only rarely expressed directly in these testimonies. There are several possible explanations for this. Firstly, the lack of emotive expression could be cultural, and especially for adolescent boys on their way to manhood. Also, the testimonies were taken by lawyers and field workers whose questioning may have been directed towards a more factual account. However, as the testimonies were given for the most part while still in detention, this lack of emotional description may reflect the continuing need to keep feelings at bay in order to cope with the situation. The shame surrounding the feelings engendered by traumatic experience may inhibit the children and adolescents ability to share their emotions, and when detained in groups they are likely to develop among themselves a language of bravado to describe their situation. Shame about feelings of vulnerability may later seriously impair the possibility of healing. The factual dryness of the testimonies may in some cases reflect emotional dissociation, one of the more harmful and dangerous results of trauma.
7. The most expressions of emotion are found in the descriptions of the way in which the confession was extracted. The boys report being very scared and confessing or surrendering information in order to stop the psychological or physical abuse. This might suggest that most of the boys who confess, and especially those who were induced to give names of others, often friends and relatives, feel a need, perhaps due to embarrassment or guilt, to present some sort of justification for having succumbed to the pressure.
8. There are many open questions about the potential individual repercussions to the children and adolescents in terms of coping with parental helplessness, with their own helplessness, fear and guilt feelings, with harsh memories, with the interruption of the school curriculum and with the many emotional and psychosomatic manifestations characteristic of persons who undergo traumatic events. In addition, in order to understand these events in the full context of these boys' lives it is important to take into account that what they describe in their testimonies is not simply a detached onetime event. This specific experience is embedded in the collective and personal experience of life under occupation and military threat. It is very difficult to estimate the psychological and social repercussions for those maltreated and humiliated children and adolescents after their return home. And yet we can assume that forced reciprocal incriminations scar the vulnerable fabric of family and social life within the community, and diminish the possibility for social support.