



TRADE UNION FRIENDS OF PALESTINE
Campaigning in solidarity with the Palestinian people

Conference Report

Palestinian Children: Their Right to a Safe and Just Future



Dublin, 22nd & 23rd November 2019

“Ill-treatment of Palestinian children in the Israeli military detention system appears to be widespread, systematic and institutionalised”

UNICEF REPORT 2013

Foreword by Patricia King, General Secretary, Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)

The organisation of this conference **“Palestinian Children – Their Right to a Safe and Just Future”** was a significant achievement, a testament to the dedicated work of a number of affiliate unions and Trade Union Friends of Palestine, and a fitting way to mark the 30th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This report serves as an important record of the conference presentations from such a wide and impressive range of speakers, and will be an important tool in our ongoing Palestine Solidarity work.

The initiative is an expression of the Irish trade union movement’s historical commitment to the defence of human rights, and to acting in solidarity with workers and their families globally. Congress and our affiliates are proud of a long-term position of solidarity with the Palestinian people - including representations to government, supporting the European Trade Union Network for Justice in Palestine, support of the Occupied Territories Bill, speaking up for human rights defenders like Omar Barghouti, raising funds in support for Covid defence, and in supporting trade union delegations to the region.

What we have long suspected, and had confirmed in graphic detail by the presentations at this conference, is that the vulnerability - and the potential - of Palestinian children has been weaponised by the Israeli state. We are duty bound to respond to the calls of the Palestinian - and Israeli - speakers at this conference to strengthen our resolve to challenge the ever-expanding range of human rights violations inflicted on Palestinians, especially Palestinian children. We are determined to rise to this challenge.



Since the conference took place, we have restated our support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, and are currently working to develop an effective strategy that could significantly contribute to the struggle for freedom justice and equality for the Palestinian people.

The fundamental values of trade union internationalism mandate us to take concrete and effective action to facilitate the implementation of UN resolutions, international legal obligations, and a just and equitable peace for all.

I hope that this report is utilised by all to raise the profile and level of consciousness about the harm being inflicted on Palestinian children, and in calling on our governments not to turn a blind eye to the ongoing mistreatment of Palestinian children living under Israeli occupation.

INTRODUCTION

On the 30th Anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a Trade Union Conference on Palestinian Children, organised by Trade Union Friends of Palestine (TUFPP) in association with a number of ICTU affiliates, was hosted by the Communication Workers' Union in their Dublin Head Office on 22-23 November 2019.

One of the aspects of the Israeli military occupation of Palestine causing heightened concern world-wide is the strategy of mass arrests and mistreatment of Palestinian children, recognised in a UNICEF report in 2013 which referred to how *'Ill-treatment of Palestinian children in the Israeli military detention system appears to be widespread, systematic and institutionalised'*.¹

TUFPP has for many years drawn attention to the trauma inflicted on Palestinian children by the military occupation. The aim of this conference therefore was to:

- raise awareness in the trade union movement and the public at large about the harm being inflicted on Palestinian children
- establish enduring links between Irish organisations and Palestinian groups working to improve the lives of Palestinian children
- put pressure on the Irish government to ensure that Ireland ends any economic, trade and military complicity with Israeli physical and psychological maiming of Palestinian children
- re-energise the Irish trade union movement to implement the BDS policies adopted in 2007

"The main theme of the conference shall be that the suffering endured by Palestinian children, including psychological trauma, is not a by-product of the occupation but is a deliberate policy of the Israeli occupying authorities. The recognition of this demands a significant and appropriate response from the international community and from the trade union movement. Invited expert speakers – Palestinian, Israeli and international - will be asked to address this issue."



¹ <https://www.unicef.org/sop/media/216/file/Children%20in%20Israeli%20Military.pdf>

Friday 22nd November

The conference was opened by CWU President Mike O'Connor, John O'Brien INTO and TUFFP South, and 17-year-old ex-child detainee, Ahmed Alsoos.

Session 1 – The Context

Dr. Samah Jabr: The Health Consequences of Violent Occupation

The first keynote speaker was **Dr. Samah Jabr**, from the Palestinian Ministry of Health. Dr. Jabr is Head of the Mental Health Unit, and well known internationally for her exposure of the impact of the occupation on mental health. Dr. Jabr has stressed the need to understand psychological suffering not just as a consequence of violent occupation, but also as the result of the colonisation of the mind. This aspect of Dr. Jabr's work has been the subject of a documentary film *'Beyond the Frontlines – Tales of Resistance and Resilience'* by French director Alexandra Bols. We were shown a 30-minute section of the film introduced by Alexandra herself.



In her presentation Dr. Jabr highlighted the particular vulnerability of Palestinian adolescents due to:

- Poor social services and educational system
- Poverty and impaired nutrition (Iron deficiency anemia was 33.5% in 2014)
- Restricted access to health care
- Home demolitions
- Political violence

The military detention of children in traumatic circumstances, and in such huge numbers, has led to widespread suffering, not only to the children but also their siblings and parents:

- Between 500 to 800 Palestinian youth are arrested each year
- Between 100 to 350 Palestinian youths in detention in Israeli prisons each month
- 90% exposed to traumatic experiences
- 65% developed psychiatric disorders
- Average age of arrest 15 years

The impact of arrests and imprisonment on children whose brains are still developing can make it very difficult for them to process their experiences. It can also arrest their development. There can be an urge to 'act out' as a way to process the hurt and emotional suffering they have experienced. This can lead to behavioural disturbance and increased exposure to risk and can severely affect family relationships.

The reality of detention is a story of horror, helplessness and humiliation for minors. It is usual for dozens of armed soldiers and their dogs to invade the family home in the middle of the night, interrupting the sleep of the whole neighbourhood and demonstrating through their excessive

aggression that resistance is meaningless. The child's father is intimidated through threats to hand over his boy to the soldiers, and often does so despite the tearful pleas of the mother and siblings.

Typically the child is handcuffed painfully and blindfolded, unable meanwhile to communicate with or to understand people who are shouting at him in Hebrew. He is slapped, kicked, punched and shoved as he is tied up and rendered completely powerless. Then, alone without a lawyer or a parent present, he is interrogated for a period of time extending from hours to weeks, with deprivation of relief for physiological needs such as the availability of food, drink, toilet facilities and sleep. He is exposed to excessive heat or cold, forced into the horror of witnessing others being tortured, and stripped naked before being subject to the same procedures himself.

Many children end up signing their names to Hebrew documents that they are not able to read. Such children and adolescents recall these moments especially with unbearable feelings of shame.



Many of these minors emerge from prison unable to learn in school or to pursue a profession. In their eyes, their parents and teachers are damaged as authority figures. Their trust in their friends and neighbours is destroyed. Their own community may not trust them either, because other children would have been told that they had implicated them to their interrogators. They live with the ongoing and realistic fear of further detention. And the family often experiences the arrest of the minor as extremely traumatic; they feel guilty for failing to protect him and thereby may indeed grow incapable of guiding the minor in a safe journey from childhood to adulthood. Unable to develop, left without education or family guidance, many adolescents thus fail to develop a mature and multifaceted adult identity. The ex-detainee clings to his identity as a prisoner. Such youngsters are stuck in perpetual limbo, unable to return to the innocence of childhood or to move forward as functional adults.

Dr. Jabr urged caution in the use of Western models of diagnosis and therapy, that there was a need to move beyond labeling, pathologizing and medicalizing. It was important that we consider the context of violent occupation and colonization, and the strategy of the Israeli authorities to impose helplessness, shame and distrust on Palestinian youth – that **“the intention is the demasculinization of Palestinian adolescents”**.

She also stressed that:

Human rights need to be restored to children, to ensure their physical safety, their psychological well-being and their hopes for a meaningful future.

It is imperative and fundamental to hold Israel accountable for its violations of international human rights, in particular the rights of the child.

Humanitarian aid to children in Palestine should be engaged with political advocacy, organized with a focus on long-term planning by international teams led by Palestinian professionals, community leaders, educators and academics.

“Palestinians perceive resistance as a duty”

Dr. Samah Jabr - Commenting at the conference on the criticism of the option of Palestinian violence:

“Occupation and colonialism itself takes place with a lot of violence, and it is reasonable that some of the actions of the colonised people will be violent. This is usually taken as a pretext to punish and isolate Palestinians even more. This has been working very well (for the coloniser) in the case of the Palestinians. I don’t want to advocate violence, the violent option, but we have to understand that resistance is a human right, and in the case of the Palestinians it is a duty – Palestinians perceive resistance as a duty.

Resistance has a very wide spectrum, but Israel is criminalising every option of the Palestinians, and they are killing the agency of the Palestinians. BDS, which is a non-violent option, is made illegal. A Facebook statement is made illegal. A theatre, when children in their schools put on a theatre, to make a symbolic expression, of the political reality, this is made illegal. And that makes people resort to action. When you prevent the symbolic expression of trauma children, who have less control over their urges and impulses, will re-enact their trauma. It results in some of the behaviours like throwing stones or attempting to stab. So, in order to minimise these actions, it is very important to avoid the condemnation of the resistance, even the difficult choices that are made by Palestinians. It is important also to enlarge the possibility for the symbolic expression of Palestinians. It is important to provide effective tools. Israel in its treatment of Palestinians is not only blindfolding and handcuffing Palestinians, they are also blindfolding the international community, and handcuffing the international community. If we want to minimise the potential of Palestinians resorting to the violent option, we have to be effective in providing alternatives.”

Dina Nasser: Addressing the rights of children to access health care – the case of Augusta Victoria Hospital

This session ended with a presentation from Dina Nasser, Chief Operating Officer of the Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem. Augusta Victoria Hospital is the only hospital providing specialty care for Palestinians from across the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as well as East Jerusalem. In an earlier press conference Dina spoke out against ‘the silent ethnic cleansing of Palestinians’.

We learnt from Dina that there are 2.3 million children in the West Bank and Gaza and that they and their families face enormous hurdles trying to access the specialist care provided in the Augusta Victoria. This is in breach of Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:



“States Parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services.”

In many cases Israel refuses permission to parents, including parents of very young children, to accompany their child to hospital. This is a particularly cruel form of collective punishment and is in breach of Article 9 of the UN Convention.

Dina spoke about how staff in the hospital respond to the needs of these very ill children for education, recreation and respite – with visiting teachers and entertainers. In some cases volunteers dedicate themselves to the care of very young children separated from their parents and become ‘alternative mothers’. Dina showed some moving photographs of the children being treated in the hospital - a powerful testimony to the dedication and care of the staff of Augusta Victoria.

Session 2 – Speaking out in Israel

The second keynote speaker of the evening was the acclaimed Israeli journalist and author **Gideon Levy**. One of his recent articles was made available to delegates. It detailed the prolonged emotional suffering endured by a 5-year-old girl from Gaza, forcibly separated from her parents by the Israeli authorities, and subsequently dying alone.

Picking up on Dina’s presentation Gideon informed us that there were at least 10 cases of Palestinian women losing their new-born babies because they were held up at checkpoints. He told the story of how one mother in desperation travelled from checkpoint to checkpoint trying to get to hospital to deliver her baby. All of them refused to allow her through. Her baby was born at the checkpoint, but the Israeli soldiers still refused to allow her through. Eventually she was able to walk through, carrying her new-born child. When she eventually reached the Augusta Victoria hospital the baby was dead.

Gideon referred to other notorious Israeli atrocities, including the recent bombing of a family in Gaza that left 8 family members dead, including 5 children, 2 of them babies. Apart from his own paper Haaretz this was not covered - the death of Palestinians including



children ‘is not a story in Israel!’ He talked about a 10-year-old child being held blindfolded by Israeli soldiers for 6 hours, and of a 10-year-old child who is now in a vegetative state having been shot in the head.

The more the occupation lasts ‘the more brutal it becomes’. Ireland, he said was outstanding in terms of challenging this, that ‘Ireland is like a lighthouse in the great darkness of Europe’.

He spoke about the 12-year siege of Gaza - ‘the biggest cage in the world, and the biggest experiment in the world’. He defended the acts of resistance by the people of Gaza – ‘the only way in the world they can get people to know their reality, that they are there, is to launch rockets’.

He referred to the ignorance of Israelis about Palestine – 60 per cent of teachers have never heard of the Balfour Declaration! Most Israelis never meet a Palestinian, and the only image they have of them is as a terrorist.

In terms of the political situation ‘the two-state solution is dead’ – he then corrected himself and said it was never really born, that it was never considered by Israel as a genuine solution. Referring to the huge numbers of discriminatory laws in Palestine, and finally the apartheid Nation State Law where Israel is defined by its constitution (Basic Law) as a Jewish state, he spoke of how Israel is now a theocracy. There were only two others in the world – the Islamic Republics of Pakistan and of Iran. Israel has now joined them.

Everyone in civil society has a moral duty to expose what Israel is doing and to take action. Civil society and states should demand of Israel ‘What are you - a democracy, an ethnocracy, a Jewish state?’ But Europe he said ‘is paralysed by the smears of anti-Semitism – the first time in history that the struggle for justice is labelled a crime’. He referred to this as ‘a cynical, blackmailing, propaganda industry’. He made a strong plea for effective solidarity:

“We should change the discourse. We should demand that Israel support equal rights – and if it doesn’t then it’s an apartheid state. And if it is an apartheid state then what is the West going to do about it. We have to ask for one person - one vote in a single state. One state means that both the Palestinians and the Israelis have to give up their dream of self-determination. We need to start the discourse!”

Saturday 23rd November

Opening Address – ICTU General Secretary Patricia King

Patricia King, General Secretary, ICTU opened the second day of conference by commending TUIFP for ‘keeping the issue of Palestine firmly on the agenda of the Irish trade union movement for over a decade’. She referred to ‘our proud record of solidarity with the Palestinian people’ and summarised ICTU interventions, including the passing of a BDS motion in 2007, the major international conference in Dublin Castle in 2010, speaking up against Israeli war crimes in Gaza and calling for the expulsion of the Israeli mission and withdrawal of Irish diplomats from Israel.

She said that ICTU has been a strong supporter of Senator Frances Black’s Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill - ‘an opportunity to pave the way for third states to fulfil their obligations and responsibilities under international law’.



She also referred to Congress joining with 34 trade union organisations across Europe, organised by the European Trade Union Network for Justice in Palestine, in writing to the European Commission and European governments demanding a ban on trade with illegal Israeli settlements.

Patricia spoke in some detail about the deliberate suffering inflicted on Palestinian children as reported by leading human rights organisations the Defence of Children International, Human Rights Watch and the Israeli human rights group B’Tselem. These children are subject to the systemic violence of night-time arrests, coercive interrogation, beatings and torture – “with Israeli security forces picking them up on the street or at home in the middle of the night, then handcuffing and blindfolding them and

transporting them to interrogation, often subjecting them to violence en route. Exhausted and scared – some having spent a long time in transit, some having been roused from sleep, some having had nothing to eat or drink for hours – the minors are then interrogated. They are completely alone in there, cut off from the world, without any adult they know and trust by their side, and without having been given a chance to consult with a lawyer before the interrogation. The interrogation itself often involves threats, yelling, verbal abuse and sometimes physical violence. Its sole purpose is to get the minors to confess or provide information about others.”

This Israeli system of military juvenile detention she said ***‘amounts to state-sponsored child abuse and is designed to intimidate and terrorise Palestinian children and their families - What kinds of monsters of world leaders allow this sort of thing to happen!’***

She hoped that this conference on the 30th Anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child would help to raise the profile about the harm being inflicted on Palestinian children, and she called on our Governments not to turn a blind eye on ongoing mistreatment of Palestinian children living under Israeli occupation.

As for the trade union movement ***“There is no doubt in my mind that Irish Trade Unions will continue our proud record of solidarity with the Palestinian people and that this is a tribute to the work of Trade Union Friends of Palestine. The fundamental values of trade union internationalism mandate us to take concrete and effective action to facilitate the implementation of UN resolutions, international legal obligations, and a just and equitable peace for all.”***

Patricia finally reminded us that:

‘BDC in 2017 also saw us addressed by Omar Barghouti from the BDS movement for Palestinian rights. Omar saluted us all for supporting the movement since 2007, and referred to the challenges ahead for us in terms of translating this principled and highly appreciated support into effective, strategic campaigns that can significantly contribute to the Palestinian struggle for freedom justice and equality. Given the sharp escalation by Israel’s regime of occupation, settler-colonialism and apartheid, of its war crimes, siege, ethnic cleansing and dehumanization of the entire Palestinian people, I know that this a challenge that our movement is up to meeting.’



Session 3 – The Careful Maiming of Children

Khaled Quzmar: The situation of Palestinian Children under the Occupation

Khaled Quzmar is the General Director of the Defence of Children International – Palestine (DCI-P). Khaled had attempted to defend the rights of Palestinian children in the Israeli military courts for 20 years. Eventually he decided that he could no longer be part of a system that was so profoundly unjust and traumatising for children. The policy of night-time arrests, interrogating children without their parents, denying access to lawyers were all determined by military orders that are in breach of the Geneva Convention.

As a lawyer he felt handcuffed and that he had become part of the system, unable to defend the children but having to engage in the theatre of plea-bargaining in order to protect them from harsh sentencing – which could be up to 20 years for stone throwing. ***Even if the child had been throwing stones, he was exercising his legitimate right to resist the occupation.*** 90 per cent of bail applications are refused, to put pressure on the children and parents to sign a statement. For these children one day in prison can feel like a year, and no-one wants them to endure this for longer than necessary.



It also became too difficult for him to leave the children in military custody when they were so upset – sometimes they would cling to him. ***Sometimes the child just needed to be hugged.*** He also felt the pressure of this was affecting his personal life. He then left his post in order to study human rights law at Galway University and following this he worked for DCI-P.

Defence for Children International - Palestine Section (DCIP) is an independent Palestinian child rights organization dedicated to defending and promoting the rights of children living in occupied Palestinian territory (West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip). Its role is to monitor, investigate, and document grave human rights violations against children; hold Israeli and Palestinian authorities accountable to international humanitarian law and international human rights law; and promote the participation and empowerment of children so they can address their own rights situation. DCIP also provides direct legal aid to children in distress. See: <https://www.dci-palestine.org/>

Children represent 45.6 percent of the 4.95 million Palestinians living in the OPT. Instability and violence resulting from Israel's occupation policies and practices define much of their lives. Israeli forces routinely employ the use of excessive force and intentional lethal force in situations not justified by international norms.

A growing number of Palestinian children and their families live in villages and towns hemmed in by expanding and often violent Israeli settler communities. Settlers are allowed to be armed. Stationed throughout the West Bank, Israeli soldiers, police, and private security firms protect settler populations at the expense of Palestinian civilians. In this hyper militarized environment, Palestinian children face disproportionate physical violence, restricted access to education, and psychological trauma.

Since 2000, Israeli forces, security guards, and settlers have killed more than 2,070 Palestinian children, according to DCIP research. This year, Israeli forces and settlers killed 19 children, 14 of whom were from the Gaza strip. In 2018 Israeli forces killed 57 children, including 49 from Gaza, the majority of them killed during the "Right of Return" protests.

Israel has the dubious distinction of being the only country in the world that systematically prosecutes an estimated 500 to 700 children each year in military courts lacking fundamental fair trial rights. Children within the Israeli military system commonly report physical and verbal

abuse from the moment of their arrest – frequently taking place in the middle of the night and during interrogations.

Israel operates two separate legal systems in the West Bank. Military law, with severe restrictions on daily life, applies to Palestinians, while Israeli settlers fall under Israeli civilian law. The age of criminal responsibility for Palestinian children is 12, whereas for Israeli children it is 14. Vastly different regulations apply to the interrogation of Palestinian children who, unlike Israeli children, are not allowed to be accompanied by a parent. There has to be a recording of interviews with Israeli minors, but not with Palestinians.

DCIP collected affidavits from 89 West Bank children detained and prosecuted under the jurisdiction of Israeli military courts between January 1 and October 31, 2019. The data shows that 70 percent of children endured some form of physical violence following arrest and 52 percent were verbally abused, intimidated, or humiliated. Moreover, 44 percent of children were shown or signed papers in Hebrew, a language most Palestinian children do not understand, and 52 percent of them when transferred were made to lie on the vehicle floor.



Photo B'Tselem

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Of the 89 children, 24 were held in solitary confinement for interrogation purposes for an average period of 16 days. The longest period of isolation for a child that DCIP documented during this period was 28 days.

Despite sustained engagement by UNICEF and repeated calls to end night arrests and ill-treatment and torture of Palestinian children in Israeli military detention, Israeli authorities have persistently failed to implement practical changes to end violence against child detainees. Because of international pressure they made a number of changes, all cosmetic. They changed the names of the courts to juvenile military courts, but they are the same courts. The same judges and the same rooms are used for adults. The changes therefore were just marketing.

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Nery Ramati: One client- a case of one Palestinian boy that tells the whole story

Nery Ramati is an Israeli lawyer who has been representing Palestinian, Israeli and international human rights and anti-occupation activists in the military and civil courts since 2008. He has specialized in representing Palestinian minors and is on the Advisory Board of the Israeli NGO Military Court Watch (MCW). Nery also felt he could no longer work in the Israeli military courts, so he left. In fact he left Israel, and now lives in Ireland.

Nery said he had always been bothered by the fact that Israel arrested so many children. He realizes now that they do it because it works – it is effective. Israel is occupying and controlling the West Bank with very little price to pay. If all the Palestinians said no, and challenged Israel, if they



took to the streets in giant demonstrations, Israel couldn't cope with that – not without many deaths and atrocities that the world would protest about. Who do you need to target to ensure that a real resistance does not arise? Israel understood very quickly that it is the young that they need to target – especially those who live close to the settlements. For the job of the

Israeli army is to keep the settlers secure. Meanwhile the Palestinians are suffering – the settlers are building more roads, taking more land, suffocating the Palestinians. And in order to subdue the Palestinian villages you need to find a way to kill them morally and spiritually, and this is how you do it – you take the children. Because the children are the energy of the village – they have hope and enthusiasm. They are the ones who give the spirit of fight to a village. So very quickly the



military understood that they should take the children. And after the children are dealt with in the machine, they are no longer the same children. They are afraid. They have a suspended sentence. They get out of prison by plea-bargaining with a very long suspended sentence period. And it works. It works with very few deaths.

Nery spoke of how he also wondered how it was that the Israeli professionals who

worked the court system, normal people who had normal lives and children of their own, could treat Palestinian children in this way. Finally, he said his eyes were opened with one particular case, a 14-year-old child who had been apprehended in a vineyard by a passing Israeli military control. The patrol had approached the boy who had been cutting grapes. He had a small knife in his hand and held both his hands up – he made no attempt to approach them. They shouted at him in Hebrew which he didn't understand. He stood there and they kept screaming at him. He didn't understand what they were shouting – these three soldiers pointing their rifles at him. In fear he said the terrible words 'Allahu Akbar' (a common expression of prayer or distress). He started to cry and threw the knife away and turned around. They shot him in the back and in the leg. He was severely injured. **'When that child was in front of them, confused and upset, those soldiers did not see the child. They saw a Palestinian terrorist.'** He was arrested, taken to hospital, and operated on. He needed a lot of surgery and metal implants for the different broken

bones. When he came out of the operation the police put him in handcuffs – ***‘because they did not see the child’***. Meanwhile nobody would tell the parents where the child was – not the hospital or the police. At all stages through the court hearings, even when he was on a stretcher, they insisted on jailing him on remand even though he could hardly move – because they did not see the child. He was charged with attempted murder, a very serious charge. The boy refused to sign a statement, they continued to remand him, and eventually it came to court. Nery was confident he could get the child off – but that would still mean a long time on remand, and so the plea – bargaining started. The parents agreed to do what any parent would do – they did their best to get their child home as soon as possible. Everybody in court then went through the pretence, because every one of them knew that the child had to tell a lie.

Nery has no faith in the capacity of this system to change: ***“The attempt to change the laws so that they look more like human rights will not change anything - if they cannot see the child. No cosmetic changes will end the suffering of the children.”***

MCW was established in 2013 and is guided by two basic principles. First, all children detained by the Israeli military authorities are entitled to all the rights and protections guaranteed under international law. Secondly, that there can be no legal justification for treating Palestinian and Israeli children differently under Israel’s military and civilian legal systems. In pursuit of these principles, MCW monitors, litigates, advocates and educates in the region and beyond. See: <http://www.militarycourtwatch.org/>

Eamon McMahon: The Careful Maiming of Children

This session ended with a presentation by **Eamon McMahon**, founding member and secretary of TUF in the north, and a retired psychotherapist who had worked in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. Eamon showed some clips from ‘The Lab’, a documentary film by Israeli filmmaker Yotam Feldman. This film demonstrated that the military occupation contributed significantly to the Israeli economy. It also revealed a callous disregard for Palestinian lives. In a shocking scene we see a retired general address a large audience of international arms procurers. He stressed the need to punish Palestinians, and stated:



“Most of these people were born to die – we just have to help them!”

This de-humanizing of Palestinians creates the context for brutal mistreatment and acts of casual inhumanity, including of children. A further example of this was Ayelet Shaked, who before she became an Israeli Justice Minister, supported the slaughter of Palestinian mothers because they give birth to ‘little snakes’.

The Lab revealed the close links between the Israeli academy and the military occupation not just in science and engineering, but also in helping to develop military strategy in the suppression of Palestinian resistance. Feldman interviewed several academic philosophers – so-called ‘military

philosophers' - who demonstrated how their academic expertise, including the use of mathematical calculus, was used to assist the military occupation.

This film was revealing in a number of ways relevant to our understanding of why and how Palestinian children are being traumatised on an industrial scale. Eamon stated that the long-term consequences of childhood trauma was well known to the Israeli authorities due to the close links with the Israeli academy, and that this knowledge was the reason for a sophisticated strategy of night-time arrests and mistreatment of mass numbers of Palestinian children. He believed that: ***“expertise in psychology and clinical research has contributed to the design of the incarceration of children strategy, and the techniques for the implementation of that strategy, in order to ensure that it had the most negative and enduring impact. It also appears to be designed to widen that impact as far as possible, so that siblings and parents are also traumatised.”***

Eamon explained that it was important to understand the attachment process, part of developmental psychology, to appreciate the devastating impact of childhood psychological trauma. A secure emotional attachment, which lasts across the lifespan, is formed in the first years of life when there is consistently available and emotionally responsive care – usually from a primary carer, in most cases the



mother. It is the basis for our fundamental sense of security in the world, and our capacity for meaningful emotional and social relationships, for resilience, and for empathy. It influences cognitive development and has a major influence on later physical health. This is now very well established within neuro-biological-psychological sciences and has a very strong evidence base.

Attachment security also provides a powerful protective factor against trauma. However if the frightening event or events are particularly severe, or recurrent, they can undermine the sense of feeling safe in the world that attachment provides, and lead to a disabling trauma response (often referred to as PTSD, a very crude diagnostic category). Trauma then is an undermining of our attachment security – PTSD therefore is better understood as a disorder of attachment. If unresolved this can have devastating life-long consequences.

It is even worse than this however, as we now have a serious body of research evidence available, including the science of epigenetics, to demonstrate that a trauma response can be reproduced in offspring – that future generations can also be affected and disabled by traumatic events that occurred long before they were born.

The question Eamon then asked was: ***“Given the knowledge base we now have about the transgenerational transmission of trauma, is the pattern of childhood arrests, interrogation and detention deliberately designed to bring about life-long pathology in physical and mental health - not only to the children who are arrested, but also to the children of those children, to future generations of Palestinians?”***

Eamon concluded that the mass arrests and terrorising of Palestinian children is being done deliberately, with the intention to cause long-term harm, and is part of a highly planned strategy that could only ever have been conceived because of the de-humanisation of Palestinians. It was also reasonable to suggest therefore, that just as was demonstrated in 'The Lab', the Israeli academy may also be complicit in the 'widespread, systematic and institutionalised' torture and maiming of Palestinian children – "that the expertise of clinicians and research scientists, and of developmental and trauma specialists, has all been accessed and possibly directly recruited to plan the best way to psychologically terrorise a child, to cause long-term pathology, including leaving a legacy that will harm generations to come. ***This is not just the maiming of children. It is the careful maiming of children.***"

Session 4 – A Child Detainee Speaks Out: Personal and Professional Reflections

We were extremely privileged to be able to hear at this session the personal testimony of a recently released child detainee **Ahmed Alsoos**, aged 17, and his father **Sobhi** from **Al Fawwar Refugee Camp** near Hebron.

Ahmed's family had received a phone call in March 2019 from Israeli intelligence 'which was very vulgar and aggressive' telling Ahmed to hand himself over to soldiers at the entrance to the camp. There were about 10 soldiers waiting to take him. He was ordered to get into the military jeep, '***but before I entered my eyes were covered with a black cloth and my hands were tied behind my back with a plastic zip tie – then I was thrown onto the floor of the jeep with extreme force.***' He was driven around and then taken to a military base where, in a room, still blindfolded and with his hands still tied behind his back and without any notice he was beaten for about 10 minutes '***...every part of my body was punched and kicked by what felt like 3 soldiers. I was put back into the jeep again....I was kicked, punched and cursed at for what felt like hours.***'

He was then put back into the jeep '***more aggressively than before – the torture did not stop as I was thrown on the floor of the jeep, I was kicked, punched and cursed at for what felt like hours.***'



Ahmed was taken to the police station in Keryat Arbaa where he was again beaten before being interrogated. No lawyer or responsible adult was present. He described the interrogation sessions as brutal – ‘the interrogator was accusing me of actions I did not commit. It was making him angrier that I was not admitting to something I did not do. ***I was then subjected to a full body search, where I was forced to remove all my clothing even my underpants.***’

Ahmed was then jailed in Asyoun Prison for one night and next day transferred to Ofer prison ***‘where I was again subjected to a full body search and was again forced remove all my clothing even my underpants. I was then given a uniform and put in the juvenile section of the prison’.***

Ahmed was subjected to further interrogation sessions where false allegations continued to be made.

In prison family visits were only for 40 minutes each month and they upset him – he was separated from his family by glass, he couldn’t hug them, and the audio system was very poor.

After 6 months, Ahmed was taken before a military court, convicted of stone throwing and sentenced to 6 months in prison and 12 months suspended.



It was clearly very hard for **Sophi, Ahmed’s father**, to listen to his son’s account of being abused. He was asked to tell the story of Ahmed’s ordeal from a parent’s perspective. He gave a very moving account of the severe psychological pain that he and his wife endured to see their eldest son, still a child, forcibly taken from them and subjected to numerous beatings and incarceration. The manner of Ahmed’s arrest was also very difficult for Sophie - he had been telephoned by Israeli military intelligence and told to deliver Ahmed to them at the entrance to the camp – otherwise they would come in the middle of the night and wreck his house.



It was very difficult trying to get to see Ahmed when the court hearings were taking place – they had to leave home at 5.00 am as the one-hour journey could take up to four hours because of checkpoints. In court, Ahmed was locked in a cage surrounded by soldiers. ***They couldn’t communicate except by waving and this was heart-breaking.*** Even when Ahmed was eventually released it was very difficult. They held him until 12.00 midnight. Sophie waited at the gate

and was then told that he was released elsewhere on the other side of the prison – it took two hours to reach him.

Ahmed sat and listened to his father with his head bowed. Sophie’s moving testimony, and his description of the powerlessness and emotional pain he and his wife experienced was clearly very painful for Ahmed to hear.

Drawing on her experience in the North of Ireland, **Arlene Healey**, a family and systemic psychotherapist and consultant trauma therapist, gave a compelling presentation on the impact of political violence on families and communities and the commonalities with the experience of the



Palestinian people. As the clinical lead in the establishment and management of the Family Trauma Centre in Belfast she has first-hand professional experience of the inter-generational impact of political violence on families and communities. She emphasised the importance for oppressed communities of 'breaking the silence' around their experiences, as a first step to address the legacy of the conflict.

She presented us with a deeply moving series of images of Palestinian children witnessing the demolition of their homes; a sole survivor of a family burnt to death in their home by settlers; a sick child alone in a cancer ward because her parents were not allowed to travel with her, pointing out that it is important that such experiences are placed within the wider societal and political context and that we do not individualise or 'pathologize' what are collective experiences.

She underlined how ***a child's suffering can affect their parents in powerfully corrosive ways, and that by physically separating family members through checkpoints, roadblocks, detentions and arrest, the Israeli military forces are acting in a calculated and strategic manner to erase Palestinians' sense of collective identity and human rights.***

Mais Jamleh, a pre-school principal in the West Bank and President of the General Union of Workers in Kindergarten and Private Schools, talked about how Palestinians' freedom of movement is profoundly restricted, controlled and observed, through hundreds of checkpoints, roadblocks and metal gates operated by the Israeli military forces.

The lack of free movement has a direct daily impact on children's education. Walking to school can literally take hours due to delays in processing each individual – pupils, workers, public utility workers, farmers, hospital patients - through checkpoints. ***Parents are not allowed to accompany their children to school and children as young as five must make the journey on their own. Children are frequently searched.***



These physical restrictions hugely impact on the lives of Palestinian children. Pre-school enrolment rates are low and many children miss school because of the threats, violence and abuse from Israeli soldiers and settlers.

University students and lecturers have been intimidated, assaulted and arbitrarily arrested by Israeli soldiers. Birzeit university in the West Bank is frequently cut off by roadblocks and arbitrary closures. Students often face 'deportation' based on spurious 'crimes' of not having proper papers to travel.

Palestinian educators and academics play a prominent role in resisting the restrictions on children's and students' lives. Education unions, including Mais's own union, aim to protect and promote workers' rights and conditions as well as contribute to the national struggle.

Session 5 – Gaza



Dr. Yasser Abu-Jamei Photo: UKPMHN

This session was due to be opened by **Dr. Yasser Abu-Jamei**, a Palestinian psychiatrist and the Director of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme. Dr. Jamei however was denied a travel permit by the Israeli authorities and was unable to leave Gaza to come to Ireland, even though he had been granted a visa by the Irish government. The Israeli government have been maintaining a medieval type siege of Gaza since 2007, in breach of international law.

In order that Dr. Jamei would not be silenced and denied a voice at the conference we asked that he record a presentation. The broadcast of this was interrupted due to technical problems, but we include his key points below.

Dr. Jamei expressed his disappointment at not being able to be with us in person. He thanked us for convening the conference, and drawing attention to the struggle of the Palestinian people against the numerous forms of human rights violations that occur under Israeli occupation.

Dr. Jamei referred to the recent escalation of atrocities taking place in Gaza. Between 12th and 14th November Israeli bombings killed 33 people and wounded a further 66. 8 children and 3 women were killed. In just the last two years 72 children have been killed in Gaza, including 46 during the Great March of Return mobilisations. In 51 days in 2014 over 500 children were killed and over 3,000 were wounded.

Gaza is only about 365 square kilometres in size but is densely populated. There are about 950,000 children, about 48% of the population. A great many of them have been affected by the numerous Israeli assaults, including bombings. Apart from physical injury a large proportion have endured psychological suffering. In 2014 UNICEF estimated that 370,000 would be in need of some form of psycho-social support due to exposure to traumatic events.

Symptoms of psychological disturbance include physical pain including abdominal pain and pains in the joints, as well as a huge sense of fearfulness and terror, clinging to parents and bedwetting. Longer term there may be PTSD, under-achievement in school and difficulties in peer relationships.



*Palestinian children sit in a Gaza City home bombed by Israel, 21 May 2021
Mohammed Zaanoun ActiveStills*

The Community Mental Health Programme clinics have a comprehensive approach to responding to children with trauma. They bring the parents into the therapy with the children, and offer counselling for family members. Specifically for the children they offer art therapy, play therapy, psychodrama and, if necessary, medication. But with tens of thousands of children affected, they don't have the resources and facilities to respond to the need.

Dr. Jamei concluded by stressing the need to end the human rights violations that have caused such suffering. ***These violations happen because of the occupation itself – there is no way to stop the violations of human rights without ending the occupation itself.*** This is a requirement in order for the Palestinians to live with peace, dignity and justice.

Conference was delighted to be able to welcome in person the second speaker from Gaza, **Dr Mona El-Farra**. She was introduced by Khaled Quzmar who introduced Mona as a dedicated and internationally renowned physician and human rights activist. She has established a community programme in Khan Younis in the south of Gaza focused on health, education and culture. She is the Director of the Children's Middle East Alliance Gaza Programme and a member of the Union of Health Workers' Committee. She is a Co-founder of the Al Aouda Hospital based in Jabalia Refugee Camp which provides essential support during the attacks on Gaza, and was itself attacked.

Mona expressed thanks to the Irish trade union movement for organising such an important conference and for our solidarity – that when people in Gaza are told about this conference, and solidarity elsewhere in the world, they know they are not alone.

Children are the most vulnerable of all. She described daily life for children in Gaza as primarily characterised by instability and uncertainty with an ever-present



threat of violence – anywhere and at any time of the day or night. She described the communal experience of children as **'continuous-traumatic stress disorder'** as distinct from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Mona had some messages from Gaza – from Leyla, a 55-year-old woman from Jabalia refugee camp whose husband was a political prisoner for 12 years in an Israeli jail, and who suffered the killing of two of her sons by Israeli soldiers. “She sends her love, and she wants to strengthen you, and asks you to continue to work for us and for Palestine.”

Mona told us about losing 9 members of her family – her cousins including 3 of their children - in the 52-day bombing of Gaza in 2014. Her late cousin's daughter, 9-year-old Yara, escaped but is still receiving treatment for the trauma, including seeing her mother, who was pregnant, and her grandmother, killed in front of her eyes. Yara's message was the same – “Think of us.’

Because the feeling that you are not alone, you are not forgotten, when you receive such a strong message of solidarity, it helps with the resistance to know we have such friends and comrades.”

After a short film about ‘Let the Children Play’ project, which encourages girls to cycle and to enjoy outside play, Mona described the violent nature of the occupation and siege emphasizing that Israel carries out non-stop assaults. The small ones go unnoticed by the West, like the daily ones against fishermen and farmers. Then there are the large-scale assaults, as in 2008, 2012, 2014 and



in October 2019.

Children as young as 12 have lived through 3 major bombing attacks. The occupation forces are constantly in the skies threatening to attack at any moment, and every moment in Gaza is a non-stop struggle. These acts are not just human rights violations – she no longer uses that term – because they

A classroom at a school hit by Israeli shelling in the Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza City, 27 May 2021

Ashraf Amra APA images

are more accurately described as ‘crimes

against humanity’ – ***“This is what is happening to us in our country – crimes against humanity!”***

We heard about the Great March of Return, which commenced in March 2018, when young people and their families determined to let the world hear their cry for freedom, and to make their voices heard – that ***“since the formation of Israel we have struggled to gain our freedom and to end the occupation.”*** Thousands were injured during the freedom march (according to the Gaza Ministry of Health there were 267 deaths, including 50 children, 2 journalists and 3 paramedics. 30,378 were wounded, including 3,175 children and 1,008 women). Mona pointed out that 6,000 of the injured were targeted in their lower extremities – that the intention was to cause permanent disability, at a time when the victims were not posing a threat.

Mona spoke about how the majority of Palestinians are food insecure. 18% of pregnant mothers are suffering from malnutrition. 96% of water is unsafe for drinking, and Israel has deliberately destroyed the sewage and desalination infrastructure. Unemployment is 45%, and 46% of children are anaemic. Domestic violence is also prevalent.

Between Oct-Dec 2018 the Norwegian Refugee Council carried out research on 300 10-15 year old children living close to the border in Gaza. **68% were demonstrating psychological disturbance, and many of them had lost loved ones or their homes and neighbours. 45% had lost hope in the future. 81% were struggling in school. 54% had lost the will to live.**

Mona asked: ***“Is that what Palestinians are, just numbers? But we are not just numbers! We are stories, we are people, we are communities, who try to go to work, to school, to university. And we are happy to try to live in peace with the Israelis – and a growing number of people now want to live in one democratic state.”*** Yet Mona wonders why Israel has perpetrated such inhumane suffering on the Palestinians, including their children – ***“Is it because they consider Palestinians as sub-human?”***

Part of Mona’s work is to try to boost the resilience – sumud – of Palestinian communities to help them achieve their basic rights of freedom, justice and return.



Mahmoud Sabih celebrates his 13th birthday with family and friends by the ruins of his Gaza City home that collapsed after an Israeli airstrike, 25 May. Mohammed Zaanoun ActiveStills

This background is why Mona considers the humanitarian social, health, educational, sports and music projects of the Middle East Children’s Alliance to be so important. These projects are also designed according to the needs identified by the families themselves. They include:

Let the Children Play: Started in 2009 in consultation with the Gaza Community Mental Health Project this is aimed at helping children, particularly girls who are more anxious about leaving the home, to come on to the streets and play. They also try to increase the awareness of the children

of resistance and the importance of BDS - recently one of the girls wrote to British Cycling to ask that they boycott their sponsor HSBC, which helps finance the Israeli arms trade.

Remedial Education Project: Helps the most marginalised families, including where there they are accused of being informers. The children are faultless, but isolated, so they try to help them and reintegrate them into the community. Mona also explained that many families are forced to collaborate with the Israelis because they are blackmailed by Israeli intelligence, for example denying them passage at the border for urgent medical attention unless they informed.

Summer Camps:

These include taking the children to the sea, even though it is so polluted and unfit for swimming except close to the borders.

Music Project:

Targeted at children living close to the borders this was extremely popular and the children have now formed a choir.



The projects help to identify the most traumatised children, and these are referred on for more specialist intervention. They want to help all the children 'so that they do not grow up broken'.

The ultimate aim of their work is ***“to help people stay on the ground, to stay resilient, to continue the struggle, and to remain on the land. They will not succeed in deleting our identity, our culture, our hope to go back to our villages and towns – our right of return.”*** Mona finally appealed for support for this work, to help Palestinians not just in Gaza, but in the West Bank, in Jerusalem and in the diaspora: ***“My comrades and friends – you are doing great work, but the burden is heavy, and your solidarity means so much to us.”***

If you wish to donate to the Gaza projects of the MECA you can do so at:

<https://www.mecaforpeace.org/>

Session 6 - Time for Outrage: A Call for Action

Victoria Brittain – Apartheid is Back

Victoria Brittain is an internationally renowned journalist and author who has been visiting and writing about Palestine and the camps in Lebanon and Syria for over 20 years. She has also written extensively about apartheid South Africa. She recalled attending a conference in Zimbabwe thirty years ago with the exiled leadership of the African National Congress, and some of the township youth who had been imprisoned, tortured, harassed, and dehumanised by the security forces of the apartheid regime.

A group of children, with their mothers, doctors and lawyers, and many dozens of affidavits from others, gave the ANC leaders first-hand heart-breaking stories of homes and schools invaded by violent police, of beatings, torture, forced confessions, solitary confinement. Young lives and hopes were destroyed. Apartheid was destroying the children's future capacity. **This was she said, a war on children.**

In response to the devastating testimony in Harare, ANC leader Oliver Tambo asked Victoria to help form Action for South African Children, in parallel with the Anti-Apartheid Movement. 'Tambo believed these children's terrible suffering, if more widely known, would unlock hearts and minds among the powerful in Britain to embrace the sanctions and other peaceful means which the ANC



leadership, and Anti-Apartheid Movements across the world, were calling for to force an end to apartheid.' **Tambo was right she said - the focus on the targeting of children did play a key role in demonstrating that apartheid was inhumane, and helped to bring an end to the regime in South Africa.**

'And today', she said, 'apartheid is back – in Israel itself, and across the West Bank, Jerusalem and in Gaza.'

She referred to re-reading a book she had edited on the reports received in Harare from those victimised by apartheid: **'I found there is not one grim detail recounted here of any child's experience at the hands of the police and military, doing their political leaders' work, which does not have its parallel in Palestine today.'**

She referred to the flow of articles, the chilling reports and films from DCI, documents from the UN, Amnesty, MAP, lawyers' groups, and many others on the cruel treatment of Palestinian children: **'what you see documented is a war on children – a war which includes administrative detention with its built-in uncertainty of when prison will end, and which destroys family life indefinitely; military night raids on children's homes to arrest them, with beatings, handcuffs, blindfolds; random violent arrests of children on the street, even outside school; coercion into forced confessions written in a language the child does not know; being held in prison with very little access for family visits; humiliation of a child, or his witnessing the humiliation of his father; giving a child false information about his friends to coerce a confession; ...and much more.'**

Victoria recommended two books which tell these stories from the closest of perspectives:

- the Lebanese political prisoner Soha Bechara's short book *Resistance, My Life for Lebanon* about her 10 years of solitary confinement and torture in the infamous clandestine prison of Khiam in South Lebanon under Israeli occupation from 1978 to 2000.

- *Rise Up and Kill First, the Secret history of Israel's Assassination Policy* by renowned Israeli journalist Ronan Bergman, which is sourced on detailed descriptions in a thousand interviews with former Mossad and military personnel, many at the highest of levels. They reveal the horrors they participated in or knew about close up. The book shows the extraordinary lengths of violence Israeli officials at the highest levels have systematically gone to - in extra-legal behaviour - intended to paralyse Palestinians with fear.

'Since the earliest days of the state of Israel this has been the moral price paid for creating terror for Palestinians to ensure the maintenance of power and it is the political and social context in which Palestinian children are today under siege.'

Victoria concluded by quoting Greta Thunberg who said 'I have learnt that you are never too small to make a difference'. She wished to follow up Patricia King's powerful words when she talked



about the total commitment to make Ireland a leader in the UN and the EU. **'I want to see Ireland being the first to start a programme of calling in the Israeli ambassador for every outrageous expansion of settlements, destruction of homes, arrest for no reason whatever of another child like Ahmed...I want this to become the new norm in Europe, and then throughout the world.'**

Gideon Levy – A Response

Gideon spoke of how in 2002 he and Victoria had both been in Gaza and shared the horrific experience of witnessing the immediate aftermath of an Israeli bombing. The pilots who dropped the bombs, those who gave the command, and those who provided the intelligence are all guilty he claimed of the murder of innocent people. Yet, he said, 'it was better than today, because today those stories would not be published, because in Israeli society nobody is interested!' He referred to the slaughter just a few days beforehand of 35 people in another Israeli bombing of Gaza. **9 members of the Abu Malhous family including infants were killed, yet in Israel it is a non-story, or might just make the back pages.** He went on to state:

"So, the killing continues, and the apathy, and the lack of interest, just becomes deeper and deeper. Israel has succeeded in making Palestine a non-issue. Now Israel has another strategy that should concern all of us – it is the world of deep state and of Orwell's 1984. That the settlements are legal! We can call the night day, and the day night – this is what they are doing right now! The next stage, already started, and it has started also in the West, is that there is no occupation – because how can it be an occupation when you own the land! And the next step will be that there are no Palestinian people – that they have no connection to the land!"

He continued: “Things that were unthinkable a few years ago are now becoming consensus in Israel. And it will get to the West! So here is the role of civil society, of activists, of unions who should really be first in this struggle – first of all to fight for truth!” Gideon referred to the immense power of Israel, including the lobby in the USA, against which Palestinian power was very limited. **“The last hope, the last great hope, is the power of civil society to raise their voice. We have to get to a stage where Israel loses and is punished because of the occupation – and the only way to do it in a non-violent way is through boycott and sanctions.”**

Gideon called on all of us to do whatever we could to bring the truth to Europe and referred to the importance of delegations – “I know you are doing it. And you should try to do more if you can. Anyone who goes there and sees the reality cannot remain indifferent...They are the best messengers.” He stressed the importance however of also visiting Tel Aviv in order to understand the whole picture - to see the clubs,



Palestinians stand amidst the ruins of a neighborhood in Beit Hanoun, northern Gaza destroyed by Israeli bombing, 21 May 2021. Mohammed Zaanoun ActiveStills

the restaurants, the discos...what people are talking about. “And if you don’t go to Tel Aviv you will not get it – how far away the Israelis are from any kind of change, from any kind of solution, from any kind of guilt feelings, from any kind of moral questioning or doubt! They are all so concerned that Israel is the most moral army in the world. They are so convinced that we have no other choice – how convinced they are that we are the chosen people, that we are the real victims, of terror, of anti-Semitism, and obviously of Holocaust – which is never forgotten, and always manipulated!”

Gideon concluded with a final plea: **“Do whatever you can to bring people to the truth, and to undertake actions to make Israel accountable for their on-going crimes, which will never end if the world will not interfere.”**

Session 7 – Action in Ireland

Omar Barghouti – A video message to our conference: Do No Harm

To open this session conference heard an impassioned plea from **Omar Barghouti**, speaking from Palestine, to **take concrete action to address our own complicity with Israeli human rights violations**. Omar is a founding committee member of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) and a co-founder of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. He received the Gandhi Peace Award in 2017. Omar stated:

“Palestinian children are suffering. Like all Palestinians, perhaps more than most Palestinians. Just last week, Israel killed an entire family, in the occupied and besieged Gaza Strip, killing 5 children while they were sleeping.



Omar Barghouti as a guest of Congress at 2017 BDC thanking the President of Ireland, accompanied by Patricia King, for the support of the Irish Government

Photo Kevin Cooper

Tens of other children perished in similar conditions, murdered by the Israeli occupying forces. Thousands of Palestinian children over the years have been detained imprisoned tortured and ill-treated according to International Human Rights organisations.

But, Palestinian children, indeed all

Palestinians, do not need charity; we need solidarity. And the very basic principle of solidarity is “Do No Harm”. Doing nothing is not an option. Your governments are deeply complicit in Israel’s regime of occupation, settler colonialism and apartheid. They’re complicit in Israel’s ethnic cleansing, siege, destruction of farmlands, homes and the murder of children. They’re complicit.

And therefore there is a moral, a profound moral, obligation to act - to offset the damage your governments are doing to us, your institutions are doing to us, including to Palestinian children. You have to act. **This is time to act; not just to talk. And acting means doing no harm. Cutting links of complicity of your Trades Unions, Institutions, Universities, and certainly City Councils and Governments.**

To do no harm means to end trade relations that benefit Israel’s military, settlements and illegal occupation and apartheid regime. Doing no harm means cutting links of City Councils and Pension Funds of trade unions that are invested in companies destroying Palestinian lives and livelihoods.

That’s what doing no harm means. It is a profound moral obligation.

We call on you to do that. And the step beyond that is to endorse and support, actively, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement for Palestinian rights. As a non-violent, anti-racist movement, BDS is the most effective form of solidarity with our struggle for freedom, justice and equality. **Please support us and, at least, do no harm.”**

Solidarity in Ireland

Fatin Al Tamimi, chairperson of the **Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign (IPSC)**, spoke of how she had listened with despair and anger to the speakers, most especially to the tale of young Ahmed Alsoos – ‘it is difficult and distressing to me, as I imagine to everybody here, to imagine my own children having to go through such a pain and misery, simply for the crime of being born in Palestine.’

This oppression is the result of a carefully calculated strategy by the apartheid state of Israel. This oppression is the result of an international community that refuses to hold the perpetrators of a great crime to account and instead rewards them for the terrorism of my people.

She rebuked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Simon Coveney TD, for hiding behind unpublished and therefore unchallengeable legal argument, and scaremongering about EU fines, in order to prevent Ireland fulfilling its legal obligations to not recognise and to withhold assistance from Israeli colonial settlements. Yet the same minister has absolutely no problems with Ireland fighting tooth and nail against the EU restoring to the Irish people 14 million euro of unpaid tax from Apple!



In the absence of government taking effective action, Fatin called for solidarity from the grassroots up. She spoke about a major new **Apartheid Free Zone (AFZ)** campaign launched by the IPSC together with TUFU, Kairos Ireland, Gaza Action Ireland, Academics for Palestine, Jewish Voice for a Just Peace Ireland and Students for Justice in Palestine. Working in association with the leadership of the BDS movement this campaign 'aims to transform our local communities into spaces of solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for freedom, justice and equality - everybody can play a part, because all aspects of organised civil society can participate. Local councils, trade unions, community groups, political parties, associations, shops, restaurants, artists, journalists, academics, student bodies, sports groups, NGOs - all have a part to play and can declare themselves Apartheid Free Zones.'

She called on everyone present to make a commitment today to recruit at least one group to declare itself an AFZ, that "If more and more businesses and organisations within our cities and communities declare themselves to be Apartheid Free Zones it will help to build a real and deep culture of solidarity with the Palestinians."



Fatin ended: ***"I said at the start I listened in despair and anger...also I listened with hope – hope because we have truth and justice on our side. Also because we have wonderful solidarity from people like you. Hope because I heard Ahmed speaking unbroken and strong. Israel will not break us...and we will win, and Palestine will be free. Thank you."***

More information about AFZ is available at: <https://apartheidfree.ie/>

Senator Frances Black spoke about the amazing progress achieved, including the support of the trade union movement, in progressing the Occupied Territories Bill (OTB) and the banning of the sale of settlement goods through the Seanad and the Dáil. The EU, the UN and the Irish



government “keep saying they are illegal, yet the settlements continue to be built, and nothing is being done. **Put simply there have to be consequences for repeated breaches of international law.** By trading in settlement goods, we help to sustain the occupation.” Frances referred to how **the non-handling of goods from apartheid**

South Africa by the Dunnes Stores workers achieved so much, and that: “The international community is watching how this Bill goes, and I can guarantee you that if we can get this Bill passed in Ireland then other countries will follow. There is strong support for this bill from Palestinians themselves, from the Palestinian trade unions and from Palestinian farmers.”

Marie Crawley, Chairperson of Sadaka, informed conference of the challenges that now lay ahead in ensuring that the Occupied Territories Bill became law, and the work undertaken by Sadaka to support this. She emphasised the importance of educating the upcoming generation on the situation in Palestine, and referred to the education resource pack Sadaka had helped produce. She thanked the trade unions that had helped with the financing of the ‘Nothing to Sing About’ campaign during the Eurovision Song Contest.



Marie strongly emphasised the importance of BDS: **‘We need to be using BDS across every policy area, whether it’s settlements, arms trade, children – BDS is a powerful tool’**. She also spoke of the need to engage the major children’s rights organisations, like Barnardo’s and the Children’s Rights Alliance. It was also important to use international law, that Israel for example is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: “We

should find the Achilles Heel within that to take action. **We should find a very tangible political objective that will send a strong message to the state of Israel that you cannot treat Palestinian children like this, in this cruel barbaric way, and continue to act with impunity.**”

The **Rev. John Parkin**, a founder member and chairperson of **Kairos Ireland**, spoke about the formation of this new organisation which had its launch in Dublin and Belfast in December 2018. Kairos Ireland is the Irish response to the 2009 Kairos Palestine call, a **plea from Palestinian Christians to Christians and people of conscience across the world to take action, including BDS action, to defend Palestinian human rights**. This is a similar



call to that made by South African Christians, Kairos South Africa, when they called on the world community to oppose the South African apartheid regime.

“What we can offer as a resource” John said, “are people who have been part of the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme, as eyewitnesses - people who have spent 3 months in Palestine with vulnerable communities and who can attest to what is going on.” This educational resource can be made available to the trade union movement for presentations to meetings and conferences. The main aim of Kairos however “is to address primarily the churches and get them to follow the example of the American Presbyterians and Methodists, and the British Quakers, who have divested from companies that benefit from the occupation.”

A UK Model for Mental Health Practitioner Solidarity

Martin Kemp spoke on behalf of the **United Kingdom Palestine Mental Health Network**. Those involved in mental health have a lot of expertise in the long-term consequences of the types of traumatic experiences we had been hearing about. Martin and his network colleagues felt the need to respond to that, and were determined to use their voice not to directly address the suffering, but to contribute to the transformation of public opinion. They provide platforms where mental health workers have direct access to Palestinian colleagues, both in conferences and meetings in the UK, but also in their organised tours to Palestine. The tours are very high quality, always include other international colleagues, and allow participants to gain a very deep insight



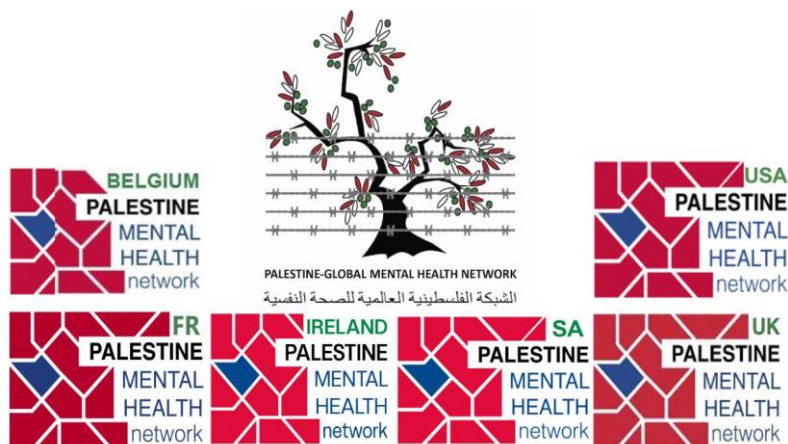
into the nature of the occupation, and of Zionism and colonisation, and the way that it functions.

The network also tries to respond to every example of collusion, which happens routinely, between mental health organisations in the UK and Israeli institutions - in the form of international conferences which are taking place inside Israel, or conferences which are co-sponsored with Israeli organisations in the UK and

elsewhere. One of the consequences of intervening like this **“is to expose the hypocrisy of so many in our profession who use the excuse of maintaining intellectual freedom, and maintaining dialogue, to justify their collusion.** But as soon as you ask them to open up the debate among their membership more publicly, on the reasons for their decision not to try to engage with the lived experience of Palestinians, they resort to extraordinary means to shut you down and to silence you.”

Martin concluded: “Action not words is clearly a very important underlying theme of this conference, which we totally support. Talking and words are also very important, and we can see from the energy that is put into shutting down conversations by the Israeli regime and its supporters how much they are afraid of us talking, and talking to one another, and understanding what is going on there. **Zionism and settler colonialism is completely contrary to the principles and the values that we are told that this civilisation operates** by, so opening that up, and providing an opportunity for debate, is one of the major things that we have to try to achieve.”

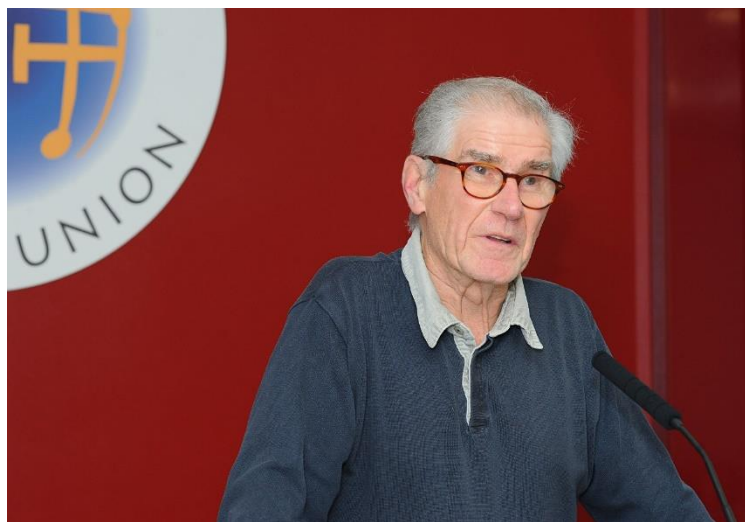
Mental health solidarity networks for Palestine are being established in various countries, and Martin asked conference to consider the establishment of a similar group in Ireland.



The Ireland Palestine Mental Health Network has been established following the conference and has joined the global Palestine network

Trade Union Friends of Palestine

Peter Collins, Treasurer of TUFPP-North, gave a brief history of the establishment in 2006 by the Northern Committee of ICTU of TUFPP in the north, which led on to the establishment of TUFPP also in the south of Ireland. In the Northern context it is particularly difficult to address the polarised



allegiances, between Palestine and Israel, of the nationalist and unionist communities. TUFPP has been working hard to inform the Protestant/Unionist community of the objective reality of the human rights abuses in Palestine. Working alongside Kairos Ireland – established with the support of TUFPP – has been very helpful in this regard.

TUFPP meets once every two months, and the steering committee meets on the alternative months. TUFPP have helped in the drafting of policy motions

on Palestine. They circulate articles and updates, and have organised a number of conferences and seminars, with significant input from well-known Palestinian and international activists. One seminar some years ago, for the ICTU Northern Committee, was on procurement and divestment.

TUFP brought over a representative from Fagforbundet, the largest public sector union in Norway, as well as a representative of Norwegian People's Aid.

Fagforbundet shared how they organise delegations to Palestine in order to establish a cohort of trade union 'Ambassadors' to promote Palestinian solidarity work in the union. TUFP decided to try to replicate this model, and Northern Secretary of TUFP Eamon McMahon has so far organised 5 trade union delegations to Palestine, the last being a few weeks ago. This was specifically focused on Palestinian children and the impact of the occupation and the



apartheid regime on their education. 17 union members took part in this, including 10 from INTO alone, and the delegation included the Presidents of INTO and NIPSA as well as a FÓRSA National Secretary. The strategy is that all these union delegation members come back and spread the word through the trade union movement.

A really important development on the European stage has been the formation of the European Trade Union Network for Justice in Palestine (ETUN), now supported by about 35 unions, including many Irish unions and indeed ICTU itself. TUFP regard this as one of their most significant achievements, as the idea for a European mobilisation of the trade union movement to challenge European complicity was initiated by TUFP.

During the Great March of Return, which commenced on Land Day in March 2018, TUFP led the way in mobilising public demonstrations of solidarity with the people of Gaza. They worked with other solidarity groups like the IPSC and kept this up every Saturday for the first 3 months of the protests. One of the most compelling aspects of this was a live telephone link to people in Gaza who actually participated in the march. They were proud to receive



Photo forwarded to TUFP by Fatin Al Tamimi

a photograph from Gaza of some young people standing at the protest march itself, with the smoke and tear gas in the background, holding up a poster saying: 'Thank You Belfast.'

Peter concluded **“the key thing however is to respond to the call of Palestinian civil society, including all of our Palestinian trade union colleagues, to promote and to undertake BDS. We should consider too how in the struggle against apartheid South Africa oranges were a symbolic boycott target. Similarly with us we should consider HP – one of the key providers of the IT infrastructure of the apartheid state - as a symbolic target.** TUIFP also are one of the endorsing organisations of the Apartheid Free Zone campaign, and we will promote this strongly within the movement when it is formally launched. Some unions, like Unison, have already signed up.”

Richy Carruthers, Chair of TUIFP-South, thanked everyone who attended the conference, particularly the presenters who had travelled long distances to be with us. “They have gone through enormous difficulties to be with us, and their honesty and bravery is an inspiration to us. Our hope was to provide a platform here in Ireland for our Palestinian brothers and sisters to be with us, and I think we have managed to achieve that.”



He thanked all Congress affiliates that contributed to the planning and the funding of the conference, the dedication of the Steering Committee who did an amazing job and Eamon McMahon who “has had this idea in his head for the last four years, and this conference is the fruit of his labour.” He thanked CWU for making the venue available, and CWU staff who gave up their weekend to volunteer to help make the conference a success – in particular Ciara Melinn whose behind the scenes work made the conference run smoothly.

Very simply, Richy said, the message from the conference is that Israeli apartheid must end, and



international governments must rise to the challenge of their obligations under international law to halt the slaughter and the oppression of the illegal occupation.

“We have two asks for the trade union movement coming from this conference. It is unprecedented the number of trade unions that have become involved in Trade Union Friends of Palestine, but we want more - we want all Congress affiliates to join TUIFP.”

Richy called for more ambassadors on solidarity delegations – to see first-hand how Palestinians live under occupation, to be on the ground, to meet people, and to see what’s happening in their workplaces and in their communities and come back to bear witness. “Because as was said today – we can’t unsee what we have seen. We want TUFPP sections organised by ambassadors, and we want to grow TUFPP across the country and to be a living breathing organisation within each union.”



Richy continued - ***“We want each union to make nominations to TUFPP committees. And we want more unions to pass BDS motions. We want the Congress BDS motion to be a live policy. This means that unions review their IT procurement policies, and their pension investments.”***

Richy emphasised the need for a national high level BDS co-ordinating committee that would also involve NGOs, churches, community, sporting and voluntary organisations, and campaign groups - that the trade union movement is the largest organisation in civil society and very well placed to drive that forward.

“The final message is to the Israeli state, and their supporters, and their apologists. We are looking at the claims of anti-Semitism that were used to try to smear the British labour movement. Be clear about this – we will have nothing to do with anti-Semites, or racists or fascists. There is no room for those people in our movement. However, we will not be distracted from standing up for Palestinians, and we will advocate for the Palestinian people without fear or favour. We leave here re-energised and refocused. ***The fight of the Palestinian people is our fight. Our internationalism is an extension of our decency and humanity. The fight of the Palestinians is an extension of our trade unionism.*** Trade Union Friends of Palestine is your organisation, and it is now time for more of you to get involved.”



Gaza 2015

Photo Ann Paq/ActiveStills

Closing remarks

Conference was closed by **Gerry Murphy** President ICTU, **INTO Northern Secretary**, and **Ahmed Alsoos**



Gerry stated that in a world of injustice Palestine remains a central issue for people of conscience and for the labour movement. It was important too to understand this in the broader global context. "So much injustice flows from the occupation that we cannot view it in isolation from other situations of oppression around the world. The building of walls to separate, divide and exclude, the export of arms that have been battle tested on the people of Gaza are profiting the rich at the expense of

the lives of Palestinian children; the methods of Israel's security apparatus are being exported to oppressive regimes around the world to stifle democratic protest movements and the ongoing affront to our shared humanity that the decades old illegal occupation represents; all have resonance in a myriad of conflicts and situations of injustice across the globe."

He said that the conference bore testimony to the efforts of the Irish trade union movement in seeking to campaign in solidarity with the people of Palestine, and would serve only to strengthen the resolve to work ever harder and campaign more effectively to implement ICTU policy.



"We take our lead from the calls of the Palestinian people. Palestinians are not passive victims



relying on our humanitarianism. They are a people steadfastly engaged in struggle and we offer our solidarity to help strengthen that struggle." Our task, he said, was to educate our members, to bear witness to the suffering, and to find ways to act in solidarity with them to end the occupation, and to bring an end to apartheid in the occupied territories and the state of Israel.

He added: **“The clearest call and most effective form of solidarity with the people of Palestine, and the established policy of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, is for an intensification of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions.”**

Gerry referred to the outstanding panel of contributors that made this such a significant conference – “it is a tribute to the dedication of the Trade Union Friends of Palestine north and south, and to the organising committee for their diligence and attention to detail, which has paid dividends in terms of the quality of this event.” Gerry also wished to thank the CWU for hosting the event.

He also paid tribute to the cohort of TUFPP ambassadors who have been on delegations to the



West Bank and East Jerusalem. “Visits have not been easy but the importance of first-hand solidarity visits, information gathering, and eyewitness accounts cannot be overstated. The work of those ambassadors continues to be an invaluable asset to the development of TUFPP and must be put to good use across Congress and affiliates as we seek to widen and strengthen our campaigns.”

Gerry finally stated that the real measure of the success of conference was what happens next, and called on all those present to build on what they had heard and seen, to extend our networks and to re-energise our campaigning work. **Congress, he said, remains committed to assisting and supporting this essential work.** He also, on behalf of TUFPP, wished to send a strong message to all conference delegates and participants – that this was not a one-off event, and the work by Congress and TUFPP on behalf of Palestinian children would continue.

On behalf of TUFPP, Gerry ended by making a formal presentation of two statuettes of the Irish mythical hero Cúchulainn, to both Ahmed and his father Sophi. He felt that the symbol of Cúchulainn was entirely appropriate – representing the capacity for resistance and for courage.



Ahmed Alsoos, who made the closing speech of conference, thanked everyone present. *“I am very lucky that I managed to come to Ireland to attend this conference. I will pass on a message from the Irish people to the Palestinian people and to Palestinian children. I will tell them that you are not alone, and that the people of Ireland are with you. I want to thank you all again for your support and your solidarity.”*



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Photos: Thanks to INMO photographer Lisa Moyles for conference photos, and to Eamon McMahon.

Trade Union Friends of Palestine was established by the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in 2006 to promote the 2005 policy decision to ‘campaign in solidarity with the Palestinian people’. ICTU was subsequently mandated by conference to establish TUFPP in the south. For more information contact:

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