WHAT IS PSYCHOANALYTIC ACTIVISM?

The Psychoanalytic Work Group for Peace in Palestine/Israel

by Nancy Hollander, Ph.D. and Stephen Portuges, Ph.D.

For the past seven years we have been engaged in a group called “Psychoanalytic Work Group for Peace in Palestine/Israel.” The group was formed by Nadia Ramzy, Faculty Member of the St. Louis Psychoanalytic Institute and co-editor of the International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies. In 2004, Ramzy, long interested in the psychosocial dynamics of the “intractable conflict” between Palestinians and Israeli Jews, gathered together Toronto-based Palestinian psychoanalyst George Awad, Israeli psychologist Carlo Strenger, and several Jewish American, Arab-American and Arab Canadian psychoanalysts, including the two of us, to form a work group in hopes of helping North American psychoanalytic colleagues to better understand the Palestinian as well as the Israeli perspective on this conflict that is at the heart of intensifying global tensions.

We gather twice a year from our far-flung parts of the world for weekend-long meetings and participate in discussion groups on the application of psychoanalysis to social issues and prejudice at American Psychoanalytic Association meetings. Periodic conference calls continue the work in between our meetings. Our goal is to engage other psychoanalysts through public events at which we speak and listen to one another as we express diverse perspectives and concerns, modeling empathic speaking and listening, and hopefully motivating others to become actively engaged in social action projects designed to facilitate peace and justice in the Middle East. We have also invited speakers to share their perspectives on the conflict, including psychiatrist Joel Kovel, Israeli filmmaker Udi Aloni, Carlo Strenger, and psychoanalyst and holocaust survivor Henri Parens.

Over time we have witnessed changes in attitudes of participants in the discussion groups, including some lessening of automatic pro-Israel and anti-Palestinian attitudes. Perhaps the most compelling part of this experience has been the group process itself, which has focused on the application of a psychoanalytic attitude as a source of understanding of the nature and functions of prejudice. Since the group is

continued on page 6
My two year term as President of Section IX is drawing to a close. Our section is fortunate that Nancy Hollander will bring her passion, intelligence and scholarship to the leadership of Psychoanalysis for Social Responsibility as she assumes the role of President on January 1, 2012.

Several of our section members are stepping into new roles. Past-President, Frank Summers will become the President-Elect of Division 39 this coming January 1st, and will assume the role of President of the division the following January. Another Past President, Arlene Lu Steinberg, will become Division 39 Treasurer this coming January 1. Section member Steven Reisner is running for President of the APA. You can visit his website at: www.reisnerforpresident.com

Our section will welcome 6 new board members: Susan Bodnar, Sue Grand, Jane Hassinger, Elizabeth Hegeman, David Lichtenstein, and Leahn Nguyen. I’m personally quite excited to work more closely with these individuals given all they have to contribute.

In order to strengthen our sense of community, become more aware of the activities of our members and to inspire initiative in the application of psychoanalytic thought to social, cultural and political issues, we have started a four month open blog through our listserv. Susan Bodnar, Co-Chair of our Education Committee, is moderating this project. As we know, there is always a gap between the writing of an article and its release. At the time I’m writing this column the blog has been open for a week. The only person who has written to us is Susan, who initiated the project. Over the period I’ve served as president of the section observable participation in Section IX projects has waivered. Although our board has been active, in planning events and panels, in continuing the small group discussion of the Israel-Palestine conflict, in initiating the Women’s Committee of Section IX; although our publication, The Psychoanalytic-Activist continues to be a rich contribution; although individuals have been active in their own ways, something is missing in terms of the potential we have to generate discourse and action.

During the Division 39 Spring Meeting last April in New York, The Women’s Committee sponsored a rally addressing the threat to women’s reproductive rights and health care. The rally was very poorly attended. There has been a lot of speculation about why this was so; a Field Note in the next issue of the APCS (Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society) The Journal: Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society, will discuss the possible meanings of this disappointing turnout.

Concerns about the state of our society have only deepened in the last two years. Our hopes for a truly progressive U.S. president have been tarnished. Unemployment hovers above 9% nationally, a rate projected to continue through 2012. A recent report stated that the adjusted salary of middle income American workers has not increased in 40 years. Women’s rights and the security of immigrants are declining, poverty increases; a social net for those in need is frayed and threatened. Wars continue. Debt increases. Congress resists raising taxes on the wealthiest in this country as one means to increase revenues. Higher education costs exclude more citizens … and so on and so on.

Our Section IX panel for the 2012 Division 39 Spring Meeting will contribute to the analysis of public reaction and response during our times. We’re excited to present our panelists: Bryant Welch JD, PhD; Ruth Fallenbaum, PhD, and Leahn Nguyen, PhD, whose perspectives will provide us with an original and inspiring experience. Our reception will feature an art installation and will be co-hosted by some of our early career members.

I’ve been struggling with a poem that has been pushing into my awareness: W.B. Yeat’s desolate poem, “The Second Coming.” Many of you know the line: “The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” This line is clearly problematic in the polarization and judgment expressed. Yet, I’m moved by the line and it strikes me now. We’re all stretched very thin. The work we do in our offices and classrooms is certainly sufficient to satisfy a high standard of moral calculus. Nevertheless, we can also gain sustenance while we contribute significantly by taking advantage of the opportunities that our community of socially responsible psychoanalytically oriented professionals offers. I hope our membership grows and thrives.

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To join Section IX, and to renew your membership for 2011, please fill out this form

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2

PSYCHOANALYTIC ACTIVIST • FALL 2011
The Arc of a Frontline
by Judy Roth, Ph.D.

I am sitting in the children’s court in Ofer prison, in what turns out to be the culmination of two years’ work around a small project to strengthen Palestinian mothers in East Jerusalem whose homes and neighborhood are slated for demolition by Israel. The project was an attempt to create an attachment-based milieu that would energize mothers long enough for them to catch their psychic breaths and regain their parenting footing. While we had expected mothers to focus on the anticipation of losing their homes, the winds of war were shifting. Mothers, while worried about their homes, were even more preoccupied with the possibility that their children would be arrested and interrogated and that they, themselves, might be interrogated. Palestinian children were throwing stones and Israeli authorities were using the toughest measures possible—large sweeps in neighborhoods, wakening families in the middle of the night, separating young children from parents—often violating international and Israeli law in the treatment of minors.

Ofer prison is not for the kids from Jerusalem. It houses the military court for the Palestinian children in the West Bank. And I am here because, as I learned about what was happening in East Jerusalem, a colleague said that I should check out what is happening to the West Bank kids and their families. This has been the nature of the work, one issue leading to the next. The children here are not only picked up in the middle of the night, detained, and interrogated; they are subjected to brutal treatment, and often disappear for days, leaving frantic families trying to track them down.

Five years ago, when I started to learn about the deteriorating conditions in East Jerusalem, I did not know that I would get up close and personal to different sides of the Israeli occupation or that I would be partnering with human rights workers on both sides of this seam, grappling with psychosocial models of solidarity.

An Israeli soldier testifies against a Palestinian 13 year old, trying to prove that he can identify this particular child as one of many who threw the stones in a village not far from an Israeli settlement. Behind me, in the last row of the courtroom, sits the child’s family, trying to make contact with him. Families are not allowed to sit closer, so I am slouching so as not to break their view. Mothers’ eyes on this frontline are barometers of psychic pain, but I don’t turn around, wanting to protect this mother’s privacy. I flash to a Bedouin mother I met soon after her home was demolished; she was nursing her child, gazing off into some unreachable place. Like so many other mothers in East Jerusalem, her sad, vacant eyes were those of a mother whose mind had been hijacked by active trauma. Mothers here are “frontliners,” as Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2009) writes, absorbing and negotiating waves of violence, grief, damage, and rage as they ripple across family life.

Next to me sits a minister from Holland, who wonders what this child must be experiencing. Like me, he has a son this age. But I cannot even “see” the child; I am wondering how this Israeli judge, who might be a mother herself, can defer the case without ever making eye contact with the child or the parents. She is looking at her computer screen. She adjourns the case, the child remains in custody. Someone gasps; I don’t know if it is the mother clutching my chair, or me. We are all more parents than otherwise. This is the overriding identification. The time a child loses in the hourglass of this courtroom seems inconsequential. In these woods, many male teens are arrested at some point, a traumatizing rite of passage.

I look at the Israeli soldier and judge. What time bombs will go off for them in five, ten, twenty years, when their children are this age? I feel my identification and empathy shift, perhaps because I worry about the legacies my Jewish children will inherit. Later, a colleague sends a video clip of an Israeli man discussing the thawing of his dissociation, which began as he watched himself organize a round-up on a video he filmed years earlier, while in the army. “I didn’t even realize I was arresting children,” he says. The clip ends as he remembers the mothers of these children, whom he once encoded as “crazy, hysterical” but now has humanized as “mothers severed from their children”; they were much calmer than he imagines he would be if soldiers took away his child. “I would go mad,” he concludes.

I leave the prison galvanized to think more about perpetration and dissociation. But a seasoned activist suggests that I am despairing of the humanitarian issues on the ground, fast-forwarding to the next stage, to post-occupation issues, diverting attention from the pull of this dehumanizing vortex and away from the most impotent: The need to look away hovers, as awareness of pain intensifies.

My identification shifts again as I move along the arc of this frontline. I am the psychoanalyst who thinks about enactments, how even the best have internalized the worst of this conflict. The collapsing of dimensionality and individual uniqueness are enacted repeatedly. Everyone is trying to occupy everyone else, to lay claim, cross boundaries, control, and erase. The rejected other is not invisible but is flattened by oppression, as if seeing might negate one’s own suffering and experience of violence. I feel stronger formulating along these lines but feel as though I am “othering” my partners, imposing a psychoanalytic lens that appropriates the meaning of their dynamics. And I am “othering” myself, by not acknowledging how partnering across this divide and witnessing is enormous privileges, with humanizing, psychic reverberations.

“It is just fate that has put you on one side of this divide and me on the other,” says another colleague in the trenches, leveling the playing field. I am terribly grateful to these activists who put me in my place and teach me how to stand. It is just fate to be a “privileged other,” arbitrarily spared from ongoing political

continued on page 7
“Sometimes we have to live like heroes because we have these choices that are our inherited history...confront or die.” Workshop participant, Ramallah, August, 2009.

Palestine was in the midst of a heat wave in the summer of 2009. I was in Ramallah to provide training to the psychosocial staff of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS). Formal training in conducting psychotherapy is severely limited for Palestinian workers like those in the workshops I conducted. The nominal concern of the four and a half days of training in which I combined lectures with demonstration groups was “Caring for the Caretaker.” Our daily sessions focused on helping the nine participants recognize and disentangle their own traumatic reactions to living under occupation from those of their clients. All of those who participated in the 9 am to 5 pm sessions were field staff from psychosocial centers around Palestine including Hebron, Qalqilya and Ramallah. My translator was the supervisor of psychosocial programs for PRCS, a quiet, warm and thoughtful man who is deeply concerned about the quality of work his staff is prepared to perform as well as the toll on them of doing so when they share the political, social and economic traumas of their clients.

The ten days I spent in Palestine were challenging. The threat of violence, danger, and suspiciousness on all sides underlie most interactions with “outsiders.” The oppressive heat, minimally dispelled by an overburdened air conditioning system in the Society’s headquarters, made dressing “modestly,” while still withstanding the relentless temperatures, a particular difficulty. But the interminable heat was something all of us, the trainee staff, supervisors and I, shared. At times, like all new acquaintances in strange situations, we took refuge in talking about the weather. Although I have spent significant periods of time in post-war, post-conflict countries, never previously have I been in a place where violence and the threat of violence hang so heavily in the air; where one must become accustomed to the indignities of being stopped and searched at random, or, as one of my Palestinian colleagues put it, “depending on the mood of the soldier.” I have also never been in a place where my identity as an American Jew, with family in Tel Aviv, whose roots extend deep into Zionist soil, complicated my experience so profoundly as it did in Palestine. I experienced both intense guilt about how Palestinians are forced to live and a sense of the terror with which my friends and relatives in Israel live. Because there is so much suspiciousness on all sides, I was guarded about disclosing my Jewishness in a variety of contexts, including to my Palestinian colleagues.

I think of the work I undertook as in keeping with the “moral witnessing” of Machsom Watch, a group of Israeli women who monitor the treatment of people negotiating the checkpoints between Israel and the Occupied Territories (Ullman, 2006), with all the complexities that experience entails. I offer reflections on my experience in the West Bank and some of the complicating factors in working in an environment so thick with historical and contemporary traumas.

In thinking about the work I did, four elements emerge, each complicated by multiple layers of meaning intersecting with the others: (1) gender, (2) power, authority and agency, 3) shame, humiliation and powerlessness, and 4) despair.

Gender

Domestic violence and sexual abuse are problems the PRCS staff confronts regularly, yet they are deeply hidden in this small and sequestered society. This mixture of gender and violence seem to echo the domination and subjugation that keep reverberating throughout the lives of the Palestinians in general. The PRCS workers make that link, viewing domestic violence and sexual abuse as emerging out of the disempowerment of Palestinian men and the daily humiliations they experience as they are subject to the random behavior of soldiers and encounters at checkpoints. But does this analysis complicate and mask underlying issues that resist address. Is the cause of violence against women more complicated than simply the Occupation? As I ask the question I know, too, that I am in no position to disentangle the multiple strands involved.

Issues of gender definition, power differences between the sexes, between subject and object are all in the room, generating some of the greatest heat in our workshop, with men grumbling that women blame everything on men, and women bantering with the men about how they act as if they have all the power. One woman participant describes women solely according to their roles with no subjectivity of their own. “There are three dimensions of mothers,” she says, “in terms of fathers, husbands and brothers.”

And then there is the issue of clothing. Four of the six women in my workshop are clad in more or less strict, traditional Muslim dress, while at least one of the two who are not is both modest and provocative at the same time. In an effort to make a point about working in groups, addressing the importance of neither overlooking differences in the similar, nor the similarities in difference, I use the example of these similarities and differences among the women in the room, all of whom are Muslim and Palestinian. One of continued on page 7
Twelve years ago, as a consultant to Israel’s Peace Now movement, I witnessed the following exchange during a dialogue that the movement had organized in the West Bank town of Ramallah between Israeli and Palestinian students.

One of the Israeli participants, Shaul, had been lecturing the Palestinians in the room on how they should conduct themselves to “earn peace.” He went further, drawing on the famed sarcasm of Abba Eban: “You Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity to make final peace.” In reply, Taisir, a Palestinian, angrily shouted, “You Israelis think you are so smart—you brag that you created a state out of nothing . . . yet you have had the money of the rich Jews around the whole world who have helped you.”

This exchange occurred within a larger psychological struggle that had erupted earlier, reflecting Israeli disrespect of Palestinian competence and Palestinian resentment over Israeli claims of intellectual and moral superiority. I have termed these particular impediments to dialogue “identity enactments.” Embedded in this particular enactment, I thought, was an expression of felt Palestinian inferiority and shame.

Twelve years later, as I traveled the land, I heard no such “bitter lemons” from Palestinian youth living on the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem and excluding Gaza. I was not allowed to travel to Gaza; the situation there is completely different and requires its own article.) Instead, I observed a new generation of young people displaying cautious confidence and optimism. Take, for example, some students I met in Nablus. This group of 15–20-year-olds is busy setting up their own Internet company that will provide advanced technical tutoring.

Maha, a keen 15-year-old girl whose eyes conveyed a strong sense of purpose, remarked, “I do not know when there will be peace. This will be up to our leaders and Allah. But I don’t care in the long run; I am intent on educating myself and developing our minds to build a new state.”

Faisal, a 17-year-old honors student who has experienced the harshness of the Israeli occupation, echoed similar sentiments. Both he and his father have been taken from their home several times in the cold of winter to stand all night for interrogation. He was never arrested. But the humiliation of having their hands tied behind their backs and being forced to stand all night embittered Faisal. “Still,” he asserted, “I can only fight through education, through bettering my people.”

To be sure, the changes in the Palestinian infrastructure and economy have increased confidence and optimism. Increased tax revenues and growth in investment, both privately and by donor countries, have spurred the economy. Productivity grew by 9% in 2009. The stock market average grew by 11%. New schools, more trained police, new roads, new health centers have been built and improvements were made to the water systems. According to Ghasam Khatib, a spokesman for Prime Minister Fayyad, a calculated psychological message of self-empowerment spread by governmental and religious authorities has also been a vital part of the overall economic program.

But other factors are spurring self-reliance and optimism. Cairo Arafat, a psychologist and advisor to the Palestinian Authority, told me: “The separation wall (built by Israel to shield Israel from the Palestinians) has had unintended effects. The separation wall has changed our focus; we now look more inward. We compare ourselves less with Israelis, more to other Arabs. Before the wall we felt “we can’t do”; now, we focus on our “successes.”

However the challenges that remain are great. More than 53% of Palestinians are below the age of 18, and close to one quarter of all Palestinian children live below the poverty line. Almost 90% of Palestinian families do not have a computer at home. Most alarming, however, is the incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among these children—close to 40% in many areas of the West Bank. Trauma in children undermines their ability to learn, feel, and ultimately think. The young men of East Jerusalem, once the elite both economically and socially, are now among the most traumatized of the Palestinian populations. Under total Israeli sovereignty, outside the reach of the Palestinian Authority, and harassed daily by Israeli soldiers and police, they are suffering a loss of identity. They face invidious comparisons with Israelis and the corruption of their own culture.

The legacy of problematic national identifications is also an impediment to hope and
The Psychoanalytic Work Group for Peace in Palestine/Israel
continued from page 1

composed of Muslims, Christians, and Jews of Arab and Euro-American ethnicity, the members are committed to being inclusive, empathic and mutually respectful of conflict-stimulating differences among ourselves. When these attitudes are challenged or threatened, the group is committed to a process of self-examination that includes an exploration of both personal and political motivations. A shared conviction that our group process represents and reflects some of the social/political dynamics of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict takes us beyond the psychodynamics of a typical workgroup. By openly discussing our psycho-political micro-dynamics, we think that we can better understand obstacles to working for peace among the traumatized Israelis and Palestinians, other regional powers, and the U.S. that are at the heart of this complex social conflict. We feel that the group’s presentations have helped its audiences to better understand both sides of the conflict by reflecting on their own attitudes and seeing the dynamics in which we all participate that move our society toward conflict and war rather than peace. Our ultimate goal is to find more ways that the group can develop its own version of second tier diplomacy, the goal of which is to facilitate citizens becoming more active in pressing the U.S. government to assume a more reasoned, tolerant, and fair discourse and policy in the region.

The process and goals of the group have been challenging, and our membership has changed over time, both in terms of ethnic and religious as well as ideological identifications. This group experience has provided us with a rare opportunity to engage “close up and personal” with individuals who represent some of the rich diversity of the major players in the conflict. We are religious and secular; we represent a range of political perspectives, and our identifications and positions on specific issues are flexible and sometimes unpredictable. When our exchanges are emotionally intense, the group acts as an important container. Conflict among us is tolerable and survivable because of the personal warmth that pervades our relationships and the basic trust we have that we are all dedicated to the peaceful and just resolution of this Middle East conflict.

Convinced that U.S. citizens need to know more about how the U.S. has contributed to the continuation of this conflict, Nancy has focused her public presentations with the group on the economic, ideological and psychological factors responsible for U.S. policy toward Israel and the Palestinians, and has published two articles on the topic. She has grown to see with more sensitivity the subtle complexities of Middle Eastern cultures and their expression in the different political perspectives of the conflict. From the beginning, because of her familiarity with Latin America and her critique of the impact of neocolonial policies, she has been quick to criticize Israel and the U.S., and her sympathies have been with the Palestinian perspective of the conflict. As part of the group experience, however, she has had to negotiate the multiple identifications that demand self-exploration, including the contradictions that mark her psychologically: intense cultural pride in being a Jew, ideological criticism of Israeli state policy alongside a visceral familiarity with Israeli Jews, identification with Palestinians whose subjectivity has been erased in their universal depiction as “the other,” empathy for the traumatic sequelae of both the Holocaust and the Naqba, and feelings of guilt as a privileged U.S. citizen who can escape the immediacy of this high-stakes conflict while other members of the group are more personally as well as politically affected.

These years of intense and intimate work with such a diverse group of people, who, despite their differences are capable of sustaining a bond, has been a unique experience and something for which she is grateful. To use one of the few Yiddish words she knows, Nancy feels in the group like she’s with landsmen.

Finally, one of the recollections we both cherish that captures some of the anguish and hope of our work in the group, took place in December of 2006, when Stephen sent the late George Awad a précis of his intention to present a paper to a workshop on “Prejudice in the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict” at the American Psychoanalytic Association. The proposal indicated that he would evaluate a particularly odious manifestation of an ongoing intimidation strategy that falsely equates criticism of Israel and Zionism with anti-semitism. He said he would then examine some of the effects of this campaign, which, in the name of protecting and supporting Israel’s survival, actually contributes to the very anti-semitism it allegedly seeks to prevent.

George’s reply was to remind Stephen that if he were to say what Stephen was proposing, he would simply be dismissed as a deranged Arab, whereas “[Stephen] would probably be sent to live in the occupied territories as a Palestinian!”

With this opportunity to visit the Promised Land in mind along with Stephen’s deepest wish to see Israel/Palestine become a land of equal promise for all Semites, he was comforted by George’s ironic remarks. He also realized that being in dialogue with the psychoanalytic activists in this group, who represent the region’s rich ethnic and religious diversity, has helped him to reduce the intensity of his own ethnic identity conflicts and slightly modify his childhood-based, Hollywood inspired, Leon Uris version of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The group members will continue to contribute to both APsaA discussion groups in New York in January 2012, and we are especially excited about organizing and hosting in the near future a public forum featuring psychoanalytic perspectives on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

Suggested Readings:
The Psychoanalytic Work Group for Peace in Palestine/Israel
continued from page 6


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The Arc of a Frontline
continued from page 3

violence both as victim and perpetrator. Imprinted during adolescence to engage Israelis and Palestinians, my involvements bring me home and yet, it is not my home. I am almost from there, but I am really from here. I try to use my marginality as a muscle, since, as a daughter of refugees, I too wrestle with a legacy of ethnic hatred and a sense of place.

Surprising capacities do exist. People may engage even when they say they refuse; they may reject and simultaneously create; destroy while planting seeds. As a foreigner, you need the “long breath,” as yet another activist says, to learn these possibilities. In a terrain where initiatives slash and burn, a collapsed project can ignite a new connection in a different neighborhood. The playing field is small.

A Palestinian partner asks me not to be an activist. He wants to focus on the violence that ordinary Palestinians live with, the disruptions and losses of daily life, and the maddening obstacles. Perhaps, he is worried about the binary thinking and rhetoric that activism can trigger, collapsing nuance and complexity. “I want you to do what you do in your office in New York,” which I hear as a plea for a measure of thirdness.

As I enter my office I exhale the arc of this frontline: the kaleidoscopic shifting of victim and perpetrator; the concentric circles of dehumanization, the questions of solidarity, the pleas to humanity, and the wisdom of extraordinary human beings—the activists who have been my guides. And I wonder, how will it all reverberate, for them and for me?

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Working under Occupation:
Psychoanalytic Reflections on Psychosocial Service in Palestine
continued from page 4

the men notes: “The women dressed traditionally are like nuns. The ones who are not are loose.”

Power, Authority and Agency

Three of the participants in my workshop come each day to Ramallah from Qalqilya. At 9 a.m. they have not arrived. Should I begin without them? I wait. When they arrive at almost 9:30, one tells me she must leave early. Without them? I wait. When they arrive at almost 9:30, one tells me she must leave early. Only later do I learn what Qalqilya represents. It is a Palestinian village of about 45,000 people, with no shelter from the relentless sun and completely surrounded by the Wall. One gate opens for two hours in the morning, two hours in the afternoon, and two hours in the evening. To enter or leave Qalqilya, you must negotiate the checkpoint in the allotted time or risk waiting for it to reopen. It is hard to manage the frame working in such an environment.

The boundary wall surrounding Qalqilya separates families from one another, from their lands, and from their access to work or to school. And sometimes children are not able to get to school or the sick to health care. The populations the PRCS staff serves are, in the words of one staff person: “fearful all the time about their children and their husbands.” Fear and anxiety are a constant presence as too is the demand to submit to a subjugating authority.

Shame, Humiliation, and Powerlessness

One participant I am calling Rashid describes the experience of a member of one of his groups. Israeli soldiers came to the man’s home to arrest him. Rashid describes what happened. “He was late to open the door. His children were frightened and held onto his legs. When he opened the door the soldiers beat him and shot him in the leg in front of the children. They didn’t arrest him. They just left him there. The children have nightmares now.” I sensed Rashid’s urgency in having me understand the man’s experience.

Rashid is a talented staff person who would make a fine clinician with the right training. Indeed, the staff at PRCS is eager to learn and to develop the skills to deal with the pervasive and ongoing traumas that are so much a part of their own and their clients’—or beneficiaries, as they call them—daily lives. They have told me of the challenges they face. Among them is the need to maintain a balance in their own lives and positive feelings about themselves. “When people are exposed to this level of violence, how do they re-establish their identity?” Another frames the dilemma this way: “Sometimes we have to live like heroes because we have these choices that are our inherited history … confront or die.” The Palestinians with whom I am working have few if any opportunities for establishing agency in their lives.

A participant I am calling Salee describes wanting to experience death. She made a pact with a colleague that each would do something to the other to bring her to the point of death, but they would have a signal when whatever the other was doing should stop. Salee never gave
the signal to her colleague who was choking her to the point of suffocation. She collapsed in a coma requiring hospitalization for a week. I was alarmed by her story and discussed it with the head of psychosocial programming for the PRCS who explained that Palestinians feel they can have control only over their own deaths. A new generation of educated elite is attempting to establish a more positive sense of Palestinian identity, but it will take time. Real successes and the recognition and appreciation by the world community of their accomplishments under the harshest of circumstances will surely help. So will a fair peace deal. But many do not expect it. An October 2010 survey conducted by the Near East Consulting Group placed optimism about a future Palestinian state among West Bank residents at only 20%. Nevertheless, over 60% of those polled approve of the current Fayyad government, and note optimism about their own futures.

Is There a New Palestinian Psychology Based on Hope over Despair and Victimization?
continued from page 5

Whether negotiations succeed or not, this trajectory of self reliance is leading to hope and confidence, inspiring imagination, critical thinking and innovation. This movement is small at the moment, but it will activate and be activated by a prime minister who calls for an independent declaration of statehood whether or not the Israelis come to the table. If and when that happens, at least 130 other countries are likely to recognize the new state of Palestine. Then it will be Israel’s and the United States’ turn to confront the roots of their own national identity.

Working under Occupation:
Psychoanalytic Reflections on Psychosocial Service in Palestine
continued from page 7

social renewal. National identifications are slow to change. Modern Palestine has been dominated by numerous foreign powers. Palestinians have experienced repeated displacements, including 50% of their population in 1948, and over forty years of harsh occupation by Israel. These traumas and their legacy of helplessness, despair, and rage are deeply imbedded in the young Palestinians of today. Facts on the grounds, like the checkpoints, exacerbate these wounds and undermine Palestinian growth and resilience.

PRCS who explained that Palestinians feel they can have control only over their own deaths. It did not alarm or even surprise him to hear Salee’s story.

As I mentioned, each of the elements I describe is inseparable from the others, creating an environment that can easily produce a sense of despair. I do not presume to analyze the political and historical contexts of the region in this brief essay. My reflections are intended to illuminate some of the psychological consequences of decades of Occupation for the psychological lives of Palestinians past, present and future.

References: