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Living in the crossfire: Effects of exposure to political violence on Palestinian and Israeli mothers and children

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Abstract
This study examined children’s psychological symptoms, particularly aggression, in the context of family characteristics, exposure to political violence, and nationality. We examined the association among Palestinian and Israeli children’s and mothers’ attachment (measured by self-report questionnaires), exposure to political violence, and psychopathology. The sample consisted of 29 Palestinian mother–child dyads from the West Bank, and 21 Israeli mother–child dyads, from the south and center of Israel. Results revealed that when exposed to high levels of political violence, nonsecure mothers suffered from significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms compared to secure mothers, a gap that was significantly reduced under conditions of low exposure. In addition, children’s symptoms were correlated with maternal level of depressive symptoms and stress severity.

Keywords
attachment, behavior problems, children, conflict, maternal depression, political violence

The proportion of civilian casualties in armed conflicts is now estimated at more than 90%, with about half of the victims being children (UNICEF, 2010). According to UNICEF reports (2010), more than 2 million children have died as a direct result of armed conflict over the last decade and at least 6 million children have been seriously injured. More than 1 million have been orphaned or separated from their families, and an estimated 20 million children have been forced to flee their homes because of conflict. These and other experiences such as the violent death of a parent or close relative, witnessing loved ones being killed or tortured, exposure to combat, shelling and other life-threatening situations, disruption of school routines and community life, and an uncertain future, have grave emotional and psychological consequences for children. In addition, children are strongly affected by the stress levels and situation of their adult caregivers (UNICEF, 2010).

While there has been growing attention to the psychological well-being of child victims of war and terrorism in the past decade, it has focused primarily on the impact of such environments on development of trauma-related symptoms (e.g., Finzi-Dottan, Dekel, Lavi, & Su’ali, 2006; Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2009; Rosner, Powell, & Buttollo, 2003) with only recently some attention being paid to the link between exposure to political violence and the development of aggression among children (e.g., Dubow et al., 2010; Kerestes, 2006). In addition, children’s exposure to political violence occurs in the context of other developmental risks children face, particularly family relations, as well as community and cultural contexts (Dubow et al., 2010; Garbarino & Kostenly, 1996). The current study set out to investigate children’s psychological distress and behavior problems in the context of factors on three ecological levels: the family—focusing on the mother, exposure to political violence, and nation.

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been ongoing for more than three generations (Quota, Punamaki, & El Sarraj, 2008). Unfortunately, it is a prime example of populated areas becoming battlefields, exposing children to destruction, pain, and death (Joshi & O’Donnell, 2003). This conflict has caused countless civilian casualties on both sides, due to military raids, terror attacks, suicide bombings, and rocket attacks. According to B’Tselem (2010), between September 2000 and November 2010, over 1,080 Israelis have been killed, 68% of them civilians, and over 6,420 Palestinians have been killed, with estimations of between 33–50% civilians. This is in addition to estimations of more than 8,000 Israelis and 30,000 Palestinians who were injured between September 2000 and April 2008. The psychological impact of this chronic state of war has affected not only the environment in which political decisions and policies are made, but the day-to-day lives of the Israeli and Palestinian populations, including children and their families. However, within this situation, there are levels of exposure to violence (e.g., Slone, 1997). Thus, while all children on both sides of this conflict are exposed to political violence, their experiences can be significantly different, ranging from security checks in public areas and emergency drills, to having lost a relative in suicide bombing or military raid, or having one’s home demolished by the military. Be the level of exposure low or high, direct or observed, it carries implications for children’s development, creating increased risk of socioemotional problems and

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psychopathology, particularly of posttraumatic symptoms but also of aggression and behavior problems. Agreement and acting-out behaviors have long been linked to violence exposure (e.g., Bandura, 1978) and have been suggested in the context of armed conflict (Baker, 1990; Dubow et al., 2010; Dubow, Huesmann, & Boxer, 2009; Quota, Punamaki, El Sarraj, 2005). In their comprehensive review of the consequences of child exposure to war and terrorism, Joshi and O'Donnell (2003) point to social learning theory’s concept of violence as a largely learned phenomenon, developing through both direct and observational learning. Bandura (1978) stipulated that material and nonmaterial rewards can serve as reinforcement for aggressive acts, increasing the probability of aggressive responding among youth. Thus, when children observe adult aggression being socially accepted and leading to desired outcomes, their own rates of violence increase. This makes behavior problems and aggression of particular interest in the context of armed conflict. Behavior problems are also associated with multiple interacting risk factors including biological and neurological vulnerabilities, as well as ecological, communal, and home environments (e.g., Dubow et al., 2010), including quality of parenting (for a review see Hill, 2002).

Attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982) offers an intriguing formulation of protection and risk that ties together key aspects of behavior, emotion, and cognition all relevant to understanding the contribution of parent-child relations to children’s symptoms of aggression (Guttmann-Steinmetz & Crowell, 2006). A growing number of studies focus on the role of parent-child relations in children’s development of adverse psychological symptoms within the context of armed conflict (e.g., Barber, 2001; Quota, Punamaki, Montgomery, & El Sarraj, 2007). Results emphasize the role of effective parenting in enhancing resilience and a sense of self-efficacy, and in attenuating psychological problems in children exposed to political violence. For example, in a study of Palestinian children (Garbarino & Kosteln, 1996), political violence was found to pose a “manageable” threat when children faced danger in the context of healthy family functioning and parental well-being; however, it was a critical developmental risk in the context of family dysfunction and violence. Another study of Israeli adolescents with learning disabilities exposed to terror attacks, found that greater attachment insecurity was linked to higher severity of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Finzi-Dottan et al., 2006).

While much emphasis has been placed on the child’s own sense of security in their relationship with their parents when discussing the development and maintenance of psychological problems in general, and behavior problems specifically (see for a review Guttmann-Steinmetz & Crowell, 2006), it is important to note that attachment research has demonstrated some links between the parents’ own attachment classifications and their children’s (e.g., van Ijzendoorn, 1995). In addition, similar to findings reviewed above, demonstrating the importance of positive family and child-parent relations in buffering the potentially grave impact of exposure to political violence on children’s psychological well being, attachment style in adults has been linked to coping effectiveness and hardness in stressful situations and in war-related situations. Specifically, secure-attachment styles were found to buffer the negative impact of war-related traumatic experiences such as missile attacks (Mikulincer, Florian, & Weller, 1993), extreme life-threatening conditions (Mikulincer, Horosh, Eilati, Kotler, 1999), and captivity (Solomon, Ginzburg, Mikulincer, Neria, & Ohry, 1998) in adults. Thus, in an environment in which the family as a whole is exposed to political violence, maternal attachment security may impact her parenting directly, by her own experiences, but also indirectly by buffering the potential negative effects of exposure to political violence on her emotional well-being, decreasing likelihood of psychopathology and minimizing the impact on her parenting style.

However, the Israeli and Palestinian societies differ on important dimensions which are likely to have significant impact on parent-child relations (Feldman & Masalha, 2010), which in turn may impact the ways in which the above factors, namely maternal attachment style, symptoms and level of exposure to political violence, may impact her child’s well-being. While the Palestinian society is typically more traditional and patriarchic (Feldman & Masalha, 2007; Feldman, Masalha, & Nadam, 2001; Smooha, 2004), Israeli society is more individualistic in its orientation (Feldman & Masalha, 2010), with both parents sharing childcare responsibilities (Feldman et al., 2001). In addition, Israeli parents endorse child autonomy and self-expression as goals, and Israeli children show less compliance to their parents than do Palestinian children (Ben Arieh, Khooury-Kassabri, & Haj-Yahia, 2006; Feldman & Masalha, 2007; Seginer, Shoyer, Hassessi, & Tannous, 2007).

Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of accounting for the social influences on child development at multiple ecological levels (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sameroff, 1991), increasing awareness and understanding of the significant role of parent-child relations, parental characteristics, and culture have for children living within the context of armed conflict. However, to date, research has focused primarily on posttraumatic stress symptoms (e.g., Finzi-Dottan et al., 2006; Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2009; exceptions including Dubow et al., 2010; Kerestes, 2006), and has not looked simultaneously at parents’ attachment styles and children’s sense of security, and with few exceptions (e.g., Barber, 2008; Pat-Horenczyk, 2009; Slone 2003) examined one culture at a time. The current investigation aimed to begin filling these empirical gaps by studying children’s aggression and behavior problems within the context of their sense of security in the relationship with their parents, and their mothers’ own individual characteristics, in two cultures—Palestinian and Israeli—both characterized by chronic exposure to political violence.

In order to investigate children’s psychological distress and behavior problems in the context of the immediate family environment, focusing on the mother, we first examined the link among mothers’ own exposure to political violence, attachment style, and maternal psychological-distress symptoms. We predicted that (a) maternal exposure to political violence would be positively linked to their own symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress; (b) maternal insecure attachment style would be positively associated to their psychological distress; and (c) an interaction such that mothers’ who described greater levels of attachment security would report lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, even when exposed to political violence, compared to mothers indicating high levels of anxiety and avoidance in their attachment style. Moreover, mothers who report high levels of exposure to political violence as well as low levels of security in their attachment style, would report the highest level of symptomatology. Our second goal was to examine the same links among these variables in Palestinian and Israeli children, drawing parallel predictions. Specifically, we predicted that (a) exposure to political violence would be positively linked to higher levels of children’s symptomatology, particularly aggression and behavior problems; (b) attachment security would be inversely linked to symptomatology; (c) an interaction such that securely attached children would have lower levels
of symptoms, even when exposed to political violence, compared to insecurely attached children, with children reporting high levels of exposure to political violence as well as insecure attachment presenting the most psychological symptoms, particularly externalizing problems; and (d) greater maternal psychological distress would be associated with higher levels of children’s psychological problems. Within these goals, we also explored whether differences exist between the Palestinian and Israeli children and mothers in attachment style, severity of symptoms, and exposure to political violence.

**Method**

**Participants**

Data were collected during the spring of 2010. Participants in the study were 29 Palestinian mothers and their children aged 6.5–12.3 years (mean age = 10.02, SD = 1.58; 69% boys) from the city of Jenin (West Bank, Palestinian Authority), and 21 Israeli mothers and their 21 children aged 7.6–10.8 (mean age = 8.89, SD = 0.83; 65% boys). Both were convenience samples, recruited through snowball sampling—with the first subjects asked to recruit more subjects into the sample by telling their families, friends, and neighbors about the study. Mothers in the Palestinian sample agreed to participate on the condition that they interact only with a female research assistant. In addition, they asked for reassurance that data would not be used by Israeli authorities towards propaganda. Their participation in the study was approved by a local Mullah (religious leader). All participants completed a personal-information questionnaire that covered demographic details of marital status, employment, education, socioeconomic indicators, nationality, and religion. Comparisons of the two national group samples, Palestinian and Israeli mothers, showed significant differences in family status (86% of Palestinians and 64% of Israelis reported being married or living with a significant other), employment (unemployed Palestinians 64%, unemployed Israelis 8%), education (academic Palestinians 10%, academic Israelis 50%), and income (below average Palestinians 63%, below average Israelis 22%). Although these differences are statistically significant, no significant main or interaction effects emerged for the demographic characteristics on the dependent variables.

**Procedure**

Mothers read and signed a consent form in their native tongue (Arabic and Hebrew, for Palestinian and Israeli participants respectively), and children gave verbal consent after hearing a verbal explanation of the study. Mothers completed the measures of children’s symptoms, a self-report measure of their own experiences of depression, anxiety and stress, a self-report attachment style questionnaire, and a questionnaire assessing exposure to political violence. Children completed—with the help of a research assistant—a questionnaire assessing attachment security, and a questionnaire assessing exposure to political violence. The research assistant read the questions out loud and recorded the child’s responses, unless children explicitly expressed their wish to answer on their own, demonstrating an understanding of the questions and possible responses. The study was approved by the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya’s Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects. Children received a US$20-worth package of school supplies as a token of appreciation for their participation.

**Measures**

The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) taps three global dimensions of children problems: internalizing problems (withdrawn, somatic complaints, and anxious/depressed subscales), externalizing problems (aggression and delinquency subscales), and other problems. The CBCL has been shown to be stable over time and to discriminate clinically distressed children from those in the general population (Boyle & Jones, 1985). In the current study, most scales have moderate to satisfactory Cronbach’s alphas (0.68–0.87).

In order to assess mothers’ attachment style, they completed the Experiences in Close Relationship Inventory (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). To complete this 36-item questionnaire, participants were asked to think about their close relationships and to rate the extent to which each item describes their feelings in these relationships on a 7-point scale. Eighteen items assess insecurities along each of two dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Scores in each of these scales were compared to the questionnaire norms, with scores above the average norms reflecting a lower sense of attachment security. Thus, division of the sample into secure attachment/nonsecure attachment was based on the questionnaire norms. Due to the small cell sizes, we collapsed the two insecure styles—anxious and avoidant—into one nonsecure style. The ECR has been shown to be both valid and reliable in both clinical and nonclinical groups across different cultures, including Israel (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In our sample, Cronbach’s alphas were acceptable for the 18 anxiety items (.76) and the 18 avoidance items (.86).

In order to assess children’s sense of attachment security, they completed the 15-item Security Scale (Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996) for each of their parents separately. The sum of the child’s rating of each parent’s items served as a final score of reported security in relationship with that parent. Kerns et al. (1996) investigated the reliability and validity evidence of the scale with middle school students and found good internal consistency (α = .93). Test–retest reliability across a median of 14 days was found to be .75. In addition, the scales correlated significantly with self-esteem, peer acceptance, and behavioral conduct and demonstrated discriminant validity as they did not demonstrate similar patterns of relations with athletic competence or grade point average. It was originally developed for children 10 to 12 years of age, but it has also been used with children as young as age 8 (e.g., Brumariu & Kerns, 2008). In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .79.

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) was used to assess parents’ mood symptoms over the 2 weeks prior to the measurement time. The DASS is a 21-item self-report scale which has been found to be highly reliable and valid (e.g., Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The total internal consistencies in the current study were found fairly high, with Cronbach’s alpha of .84, .86 and .90 for depression, anxiety, and stress, respectively.

Two questionnaires were used to assess mothers’ and children’s exposure to political violence. The first, the Exposure to Political Violence Questionnaire (Haj Yahia, 2004) is a self-report questionnaire on which the participants (both mothers and children) were asked to indicate which of a list of 44 items they have experienced. Items included questions such as “were you arrested by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF)?”; “Were you present when a house of a relative was demolished?”; “Did the...
The first hypothesis was not confirmed, mothers with low exposure to political violence. Symptoms than mothers with high exposure to political violence.

F. This hypothesis was confirmed, Wilks’ Lambda = 0.59, F(3,46) = 9.35, p = .04, η² = .41. Analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) on each dependent variable were conducted as follow-up tests. The analysis showed a significant effect of mothers’ attachment security on levels of depression symptoms, F(1,48) = 15.77, p = .000, η² = .27, anxiety symptoms, F(1,48) = 24.26, p = .000, η² = .36, and stress symptoms, F(1,48) = 23.25, p = .000, η² = .35. The direction of these significant differences revealed significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms among nonsecure than secure mothers (see Table 1).

The first hypothesis aimed to validate the main effect of exposure to political violence (high/low) and mothers’ attachment security (secure/nonsecure) on depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, F(1,48) = 4.18, p = .04, η² = .17, and stress symptoms, F(1,48) = 3.85, p = .05, η² = .14. The direction of these significant differences revealed significantly higher levels of depression and stress symptoms among Palestinian mothers than Israeli mothers.

Means and standard deviations for the dependent variables for each factor are presented in the following table.

The main hypothesis predicted a significant interaction between mothers’ exposure to political violence (high/low) and mothers’ attachment security (secure/nonsecure) on the dependent variables. This hypothesis was confirmed, Wilks’ Lambda = 0.83, F(3,46) = 2.86, p = .04, η² = .17. An ANCOVA analysis of the interaction for each dependent variable separately confirmed the hypothesis. The analysis showed a significant interaction between mothers’ attachment security and EPV on levels of depression symptoms, F(1,48) = 5.92, p = .02, η² = .12, anxiety symptoms, F(1,48) = 5.38, p = .03, η² = .11, and stress symptoms, F(1,48) = 7.96, p = .007, η² = .16. As predicted, the significant interaction indicated that in the case of high exposure to political violence, there are significantly higher levels of depression (p < .001), anxiety (p < .001), and stress symptoms (p < .001) among nonsecure than secure mothers. However, in the case of low exposure to political violence, the differences between secure and nonsecure mothers in depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms were nonsignificant (see Figure 1).

Finally, an exploratory question addressed cross-national differences between Palestinian and Israeli mothers in EPV and attachment style. Palestinian and Israeli mothers’ reports indicated no significant differences in levels of exposure to political violence. Among Palestinian mothers 55.2% (N = 16) were highly exposed to political violence. Similarly, among Israeli mothers 57% (N = 12) were highly exposed to political violence. In contrast, Palestinian mothers exhibited higher levels of anxiety and avoidance in the experience of close relationships, compared to the Israeli mothers. Specifically, there were significant differences between Israeli (M = 2.99, SD = 0.88) and Palestinian mothers (M = 3.65, SD = 0.67) in levels of avoidance in the experience of close relationships, t(48) = 3.21, p = .002, η² = .21. Additionally, there were significant differences between Israeli (M = 2.80, SD = 0.91) and Palestinian mothers (M = 3.70, SD = 0.94) in levels of anxiety in the experience of close relationships, t(48) = 3.69, p = .000, η² = .24. These differences are also reflected in the incidence rates of the two populations: among Palestinian mothers, 72% (N = 21) were high in avoidance, 72% (N = 21) were high in anxiety, and 51.7% (N = 15) were high in both scales. Among Israeli mothers, 33% (N = 7) were high in avoidance, 29% (N = 8) were high in anxiety, and 9% (N = 2) were high in both scales.

Table 1. Effects of mothers’ nationality, exposure to political violence (EPV) and attachment security on depression, anxiety and stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Depression symptoms</th>
<th>Stress symptoms</th>
<th>Anxiety symptoms</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestinian mothers</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israeli mothers</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure attachment</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonsecure attachment</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low EPV</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High EPV</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>2.07</td>
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IDF barge your home when you were away?” The second, based on the Physical Exposure to Missiles Questionnaire (Braun-Lewensohn, Sagy, & Roth, 2011) consisted of five items. Mothers and children were asked to report whether a missile had fallen on their homes, whether they had been hurt by a missile, whether someone they knew had been hurt, whether the home of someone they knew had been damaged and whether missiles had fallen in their neighborhood. For both questionnaires, items marked positive or negative for exposure by participants were weighted on the basis of assessments of severity of events by independent judges. In line with events methodology, weightings were predetermined and items were rated for severity on a 1–3 Likert scale. These severity assessments yielded the weighting formula for the coding of the scale as: mild items were multiplied by 1, items categorized as moderate were multiplied by 2, and items categorized as severe were multiplied by 3. In the present study, exposure to political violence (EPV) score was calculated as the sum of reported numbers of events calibrated for severity. In order to divide the participant population into high- versus low-exposure groups, the two groups were divided by a median split procedure.

Results

Mothers

A three-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted in which the three factors were nationality (Palestinian/Israeli), mothers’ exposure to political violence (EPV) (high/low) and mothers’ attachment security (secure attachment/nonsecure attachment). The three dependent variables were depression symptoms, anxiety symptoms, and stress symptoms. A preliminary analysis confirmed the homogeneity of slopes assumption. The analysis showed a significant interaction effect between the three factors on depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, Wilks’ Lambda = 0.82, F(3,46) = 3.05, p = .04, η² = .18.

The first hypothesis aimed to validate the main effect of exposure to political violence on depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, and stated that mothers with high exposure to political violence would exhibit greater depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms than mothers with low exposure to political violence. The first hypothesis was not confirmed, p = .13.

The second hypothesis assumed a main effect of mothers’ attachment security on depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, and stated that mothers with a nonsecure attachment would exhibit greater depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms than mothers with a secure attachment. This hypothesis was confirmed, Wilks’ Lambda = 0.59, F(3,46) = 9.35, p = .04, η² = .41.
Children

A three-way MANOVA was conducted in which the three factors were nationality (Palestinian/Israeli), children’s exposure to political violence (EPV, high/low), and children’s attachment security (secure/nonsecure). The dependent variables were behavioral and emotional problems according to the CBCL general scores (externalizing, internalizing, and total problems), and its subscales for specific problems. The analysis showed a nonsignificant interaction between the three factors on behavior or emotional problems Wilks’ Λ = 0.75, F(3,46) = 2.57, p = .08, η² = .25, and no main effects for either attachment security or exposure to political violence, p = ns.

However, there was a significant main effect for children’s nationality on behavioral and emotional problems, Wilks’ Λ = 0.80, F(3,46) = 3.33, p = .02, η² = .20. Specifically, ANCOVAs on each dependent variable revealed a significant effect of children’s nationality on levels of externalizing problems, F(1,48) = 9.98, p = .003, η² = .19, internalizing problems, F(1,48) = 5.61, p = .02, η² = .12, and total behavioral and emotional problems, F(1,48) = 9.77, p = .003, η² = .19. Palestinian children exhibited higher levels of externalizing problems (M = 9.89, SD = 1.40) than Israeli children (M = 6.74, SD = 2.36) as well as higher levels of internalizing problems (M = 5.97, SD = 1.07) than Israeli children (M = 5.29, SD = 1.81). Finally, Palestinian children exhibited higher levels of total behavioral and emotional problems (M = 25.94, SD = 3.52) than Israeli children (M = 19.16, SD = 5.94).

Mother–child

In order to examine the connection between mothers’ and children’s symptomatology, an analysis using Pearson’s correlation coefficient was conducted. The results indicated a statistically significant linear relationship between children’s externalizing problems and mother’s depression symptoms (r = 0.31, p = .02), as well as with maternal stress symptoms (r = 0.35, p = .01).

Finally, we explored cross-national differences between Palestinian and Israeli children in EPV and attachment security. There were significant differences between Israeli and Palestinian children in levels of exposure to political violence. Among Israeli children, 58% had been exposed to high levels of political violence compared to 36% of Palestinian children, who live in Jenin. In contrast, there were no significant differences in secure attachment between Israeli and Palestinian children, p = .65.

Discussion

The current study examined Palestinian and Israeli children’s behavior problems and aggression within the context of their family, their culture, and the violence to which they are exposed as a result of the ongoing Palestinian–Israeli conflict. In conducting it, we had the opportunity to compare psychological distress among mothers and children on both sides of the conflict, concurrently. Our first goal was to examine the link among mothers’ exposure to political violence, attachment style, and symptoms. As predicted, a significant interaction was found between mothers’ exposure to political violence (high/low) and mothers’ attachment security (secure/nonsecure) on these psychological symptoms. Specifically, our data suggest that when exposed to high levels of political violence, nonsecure mothers suffer from significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms compared to secure mothers, a gap that was significantly reduced under conditions of low exposure to political violence. Thus, as attachment theory and research would propose, under situations of stress, one’s attachment style—sense of security in the availability and responsiveness of others—would come into play, buffering distress in the case of security in attachment, but exacerbating it when one is insecurely attached.

This is congruent with attachment theory, which conceptualizes the attachment system as a biological system that developed through evolution, motivating the infant to seek proximity to the primary attachment figure in cases of danger or distress (Bowlby, 1969/1982, 1973). Based on the quality of the child’s interactions with their main caregivers, the individual forms expectations of others, as well as their own sense of self-worth (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Lending support to the notion that the attachment system affects the way adults construe their close relationships, cope with stress, and regulate distress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), adult attachment research has shown that the attachment system remains active and affects psychological functioning in adulthood (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Doron, Moulding, Kyrillos, Nedeljkovic, & Mikulincer, 2009; Dozier, Stovall, & Albus, 1999; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Main & Goldwyn, 1984; see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review) and that both attachment anxiety and avoidance are involved in the development and maintenance of affective disorders, such as depression (e.g., Carnelley, Pietromonaco, & Jaffe, 1994; Wei, Mallinckrodt, Russell, & Abraham, 2004) and anxiety (e.g., Doron, et al., 2009; Riskind et al., 2004; Safford, Alloy, Crossfield, Morocco, & Wang, 2004).

When examining differences between women across the two nations, Palestinian mothers were found to be more anxious and avoidant in the context of close relationships than Israeli mothers. Based on the research outlined above, it is not surprising that the Palestinian mothers also reported significantly higher levels of psychological symptoms than Israeli mothers, and that when looking at the entire sample of women, significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms were found among nonsecure mothers than secure mothers. Conversely, our data showed no link between exposure to political violence and these symptoms. Taken together, our data are in line with previous research demonstrating a buffering role for secure attachment.
styles in situations of war-related traumatic experiences in adults (Mikulincer et al., 1993; Mikulincer et al., 1999; Solomon et al., 1998), suggesting that just as with children (e.g., Finzi-Dottor et al., 2006; Garbarino & Kostelnky, 1996) for women too the effects of exposure to armed conflict may be attenuated by a sense of healthy family relationships. The fact that in the current investigation the same buffering effect of attachment has not been found for children may stem from the measure used—a self-report questionnaire. It may be that a more sensitive method of assessment of parent–child relations, such as an observed mother–child interaction, would allow such buffering effects to come into view.

Our second overarching goal was to examine the same link among exposure to political violence and attachment security in children, looking at symptoms including acting-out problem behaviors, as well as anxiety and depression. Our prediction that children’s reported security in their relationship with their mothers would ameliorate the negative effect of exposure to political violence, such that they would have lower levels of symptoms than the children reporting less security, was not confirmed. In addition, children’s symptoms were not related to their reports of attachment security nor were they related to their level of exposure to political violence. The only link to children symptoms found in our study, more specifically to aggression and behavior problems, was maternal level of depressive symptoms and severity of stress. Specifically, our data revealed a linear relationship between children’s externalizing problems and maternal levels of depression and stress. This association is in line with the literature suggesting maternal depression is a risk factor for childhood psychopathology, increasing the risk for both internalizing and externalizing problems (Goodman, 2007; Goodmand & Gottlib, 1999). Maternal depression has long been associated with a broad range of negative parenting behaviors, including difficulty in regulating their children’s and their own emotions (e.g., Goodman & Gottlib, 1999), low responsiveness and involvement (e.g., Cohn & Tronick, 1987), less play, lower responsivity, negative discipline, and verbal abuse (Lovejoy, Graczyk, Terry, Villarruel, & McKinney, 2000; Lyons-Ruth, Wolfe, Lyubchik, & Steinard, 2002; McLearn, Minkovitz, Strobin, Marks, & Hou, 2006; Radke-Yarrow, 1989; Shaw et al., 2006; Zuravin, 1989), with long-term effects on children’s behavior (e.g., Leckman-Westin, Cohen, & Stueve, 2009).

Exploring children’s symptoms across the two nations, we found that Palestinian mothers reported their children exhibited higher levels of externalizing and internalizing problems than the Israeli mothers. This finding follows from the above mothers’ data, which showed the Palestinian mothers reported greater levels of psychological distress than their Israeli counterparts. Combined with the lack of association between children’s symptoms and exposure to political violence, this finding lends support to previous research implying that family factors may constitute a greater risk for the development of behavior problems than the mere exposure to political violence (e.g., Barber, 1999; Garbarino & Kostelnky, 1996).

**Limitations and future directions**

Several methodological limitations need to be addressed. First, the current findings are based on cross-sectional data, precluding conclusions about direction of causality; and the process of recruitment of families calls for caution in generalization of conclusions, as we used a convenience sample. Second, the data were collected from only one source, with the mother reporting both about herself and about the child. One comprehensive review (Richters, 1992) and several studies suggest that while some reporting bias may be expected, such that more depressed mothers may be more likely to report more negative child behavior (e.g., Leckman-Westin et al., 2009), it probably does not account for the entire relationship between maternal depression and mother-reported child behavior (Boyle & Pickles, 1997; Mick, Santangelo, Wypij, & Biederman, 2000). Future research should address these issues by gathering information from fathers, as well as about the child–father relationship. Such data would add great value to both increasing the reliability of reports, as well as providing insight into the possible contribution of the father–child relationship to children’s resilience or vulnerability in the context of environmental risks such as exposure to political violence.

Third, this study is embedded in a complicated sociopolitical situation, with the specific timing of data collection possibly critical in terms of the severity of exposure to political violence. Thus, while mothers did not differ in their reports of exposure, the children did, with more Israeli children reporting exposure to high levels of political violence than Palestinian children. This finding is in contrast to other authors’ findings indicating a very high rate of exposure to violence among youngsters living in the West Bank (e.g., Giacaman, Shannon, Saab, Arya, & Boyce, 2007; Pat-Horenczky et al., 2009), and may be a result of the specific time of data collection and the location both within the West bank and within Israel. While significant levels of political violence were experienced by civilians on both sides of this conflict, there have been also long periods of relative calm, with data collected for this study during one of these times. Future research would benefit from longitudinal data, looking at the trajectory of children’s and mothers’ psychological distress in relation to severity of violence. Such research should also include observational as well as experimental data.

We are aware that data concerning close relationships as well as information regarding children need to be considered cautiously, with cross-cultural sensitivity. Specifically, as discussed above, the Israeli and Palestinian societies differ on dimensions such as tradition (Feldman & Masalha, 2007, 2010; Feldman et al., 2001; Smooha, 2004) and child-rearing goals (Ben Arieh et al., 2006; Feldman & Masalha, 2007; Seginer et al., 2007). Thus, the meaning of specific questions may differ between the two populations. Finally, in the Palestinian sample, level of disclosure may have been limited due to cultural factors as well as the knowledge that the data were for research based in Israel.

Finally, future research looking at the potential of attachment to buffer the potential negative effects of mothers’ and children’s exposure to political violence on psychological well-being, should explore additional populations, such as Israeli-Palestinian mothers and children, or Israelis living in the West Bank. This will allow better control for cultural differences.

Despite these limitations, this study highlights the importance of studying the effects of exposure to political violence on children’s development using a developmental ecological approach. Specifically, our data point to maternal distress as key in understanding the implications of living in an environment characterized by armed conflict on children’s development. While further research is certainly needed to gain an understanding of the larger picture, our findings suggest that prevention and intervention programs should focus not only on the child but include the mother as well—treating her distress and its impact on her relationship with her child—in order to make a significant impact and promote children’s well-being.
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References


