

Transcript

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# Israel and Gaza: The Children of War

Lyse Doucet

Chief International Correspondent, BBC (via video link)

Dr James Rodgers

Senior Lecturer in Journalism, City University London; Author: *Headlines from the Holy Land Reporting the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*

George Graham

Head of Conflict and Humanitarian Policy and Advocacy, Save the Children

Sami Abdel-Shafi

Academy Asfari Senior Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Chair: Jane Kinninmont

Deputy Head and Senior Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

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10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710  
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## Jane Kinninmont

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Chatham House for today's screening and discussion on Israel and Gaza: The Children of War. Children in Gaza and in Israel have lived through three wars in the past six years and last summer, some 500 children were killed in the most recent resurgence of the fighting. All but one of them, Palestinian.

BBC2 has an upcoming documentary looking at the lives of children on both sides of the border and how this current generation is being affected by the war. We're delighted to be showing clips from this today. We have a panel of expert speakers who will then be discussing the clips with each other reflecting on what this means for the future of the conflict and on the issues that it raises around child rights and also some of the issues around reporting over conflict which is so profoundly contentious and contested.

Lyse Doucet was hoping to be here today to talk to you in person about the film, but unfortunately is stuck in Vienna, waiting like the rest of the world for some kind of an announcement to come out of the Iran nuclear talks. But she has kindly agreed to join us on Skype, to introduce the film, say a few words about it, before we have the film clips and we just have to hope that there isn't a diplomatic breakthrough within the next hour, so that we can continue our discussion. Thank you very much.

## Lyse Doucet

Hello. Can you hear me in lovely Chatham House?

## Jane Kinninmont

Yes, we can hear you. I don't know if you can hear us, but go ahead.

## Lyse Doucet

Such are the glories of technology. Hello my name is Lyse Doucet, I'm a BBC journalist who has worked in the Middle East for the past 20 years and I'm a former member of the council at Chatham House, so it's a great honour for me today to be with you, not just in spirit, as the saying goes, but with you on a video link. And I apologize for not being able to be with you in presence.

I always say journalism is always an excuse for bad manners, but in this case I think, let me speak, not just for the journalists who are awaiting, but the negotiators from the B5+1 and plus Iran who are really on the last stretch of a marathon to really try to reach what would be a historic deal on Iran's nuclear programme and a negotiated outcome when, as all of you know, there are so few conflicts in the world, which do have negotiated outcomes and which indeed, have any kind of outcome, a political or a peaceful outcome in sight, which is not to say of course, that the deal does not have its controversy. But that's a story for another day.

I want to thank you very much, first of all to Chatham House, for offering to show some clips from our documentary tonight, Children of the Gaza War and I want to thank all of

you for coming here today, because I like to believe that it signals that you, like us at the BBC, like many I think around the world, are concerned that in wars of our time, because of the nature in which war is fought, we no longer say, 'Well you remember decades ago, a century ago, it used to be women and children first, let us protect the innocent and the youngest in any conflict.'

Then it became sadly, in our century, was that women and children were on the front line and I think what we have seen in the really very protracted and very punishing wars of our time, that children are all too often the front line. They are targeted, they are seen as a part of the weapons of war. This was our experience covering the war in Syria, which led us to do a documentary last year on the children of the Syrian war and BBC2 asked us then to follow-up looking at children in the Gaza war.

From the very beginning, it was very important for us that whatever the very big, the very stark differences, and we'll be discussing some of those differences over the next hour, politically, physically, in terms of the numbers, between children who live in Gaza and children who live in southern Israel, that the perceptions of the conflict matter as much if you were looking at the psychological impact of this war.

This is why our editorial decision was to look, not just at what the really, really distressing plight and many of you would have seen the images that came from the Gaza war, which began this day, last year, the summer war. Harrowing images, most of which came from Gaza, but also came from southern Israel, this is the third war in six years and our question was, how do children see these experiences? How do they describe them?

Because it's our view that, not only are children experiencing these wars, but they also have an extraordinary ability to articulate for themselves what they're going through. Which gives us not just an understanding of the war, but sadly, a glimpse into the future. Many of you here today would have followed the ins and outs of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and really don't want to be told, but the future could be even more difficult than the present and past. But the youngest tell us of the future and this is what we all so want you to take away from this film.

It was also, and I have to say that, even though I've covered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for 20 years now, I am still struck, when you stand on the edge of a Kibbutz in Nahal Oz and can see the entire skyline of Gaza, how close Israelis and Gazans live to each other, and yet how with every confrontation, how further apart they grow. It was so sad to hear grandparents, the older generation, talking about how Israelis and Palestinians would go back and forth. One woman, a British woman actually in Nahal Oz, in the Kibbutz says she bought her wedding dress in Gaza. She used a shop in Gaza.

And Palestinians told us about how they used to come over every day across the border. That doesn't happen anymore and there's no longer human contact, which is why you will hear in this film quite some shocking expressions of hatred, expressed by children on both sides, who see just darker forces who are responsible for their sense of loss and real sense of being robbed of what any of us and all of them would describe as a normal childhood.

But I hope you will also see, as we did, some little glimmers of hope because I think none of us should really lose hope. We should always hope that one day the future will be better than the present and the past, and of course it will fall to the younger generation.

Let me leave it there and let me allow you then to see some of the excerpts from the film tonight. It was not an easy film to make, at points it may not be an easy film to watch, but it is our view and I hope that you will share it. It is important to try to put at least some of the politics, not completely, but some of the politics aside to simply hear the voices, the stories of the children. Thank you.

[Film plays 0:07:50 - 0:13:00]

### Jane Kinninmont

So we have a panel of three speakers to discuss some of the implications of the film and we're going to start with Dr James Rogers, senior lecturer in journalism at City University, who spent 20 years working as a journalist, including two years in Gaza from 2002, when he was, at the time, the only international journalist based in Gaza. He is shortly going to publish a book, *Headlines from the Holy Land*, looking at diplomacy and journalism in covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and I look forward to hear his thoughts on the film and some of the broader issues around covering this particular conflict.

### Dr James Rodgers

Thank you. I'd like to begin by considering why would the filmmakers choose to focus on children? Well, I think there are a number of reasons, but I'm going to look at one of the more obvious editorial ones to begin with, which is that obviously it engages the audience, it's a very good way of telling the story, as Lyse said in her opening remarks, of a growing separation. I think this is a very important point because it is a growing separation.

When I was in Gaza a little more than 10 years ago now, in the summer of 2003, there was a hudna, which usually translated into English as a ceasefire or a temporary truce and during that time, I as a correspondent, got an opportunity to look in some more depth at some of the issues, which both sides faced. I decided to do a story about cafe owners, because at that time, cafes and bars in West Jerusalem were frequently the targets of suicide bombers. So they were, at that stage, briefly relaxing the extensive security measures which they had. But I also spoke to a cafe owner in the old city of Jerusalem. You can spend many years in a place and there are some conversations which stick in your mind.

This gentleman, I suppose, would have been aged around 50 at the time. He said to me, 'Look at the younger generation. They were born in the first intifada and they are growing up in the second. We didn't necessarily used to be the best of friends with Israelis, but we did know them and we did do business with them. We did have some kind of mutually beneficial relationship.' When I was in Gaza, then I was in my mid 30s and I got the sense that people of my age and older had perhaps enjoyed that kind of relationship and almost nobody younger had. So if we look at this generation now, more than a decade later, that degree of separation is only growing.

I remember too, a young man who used to work with me occasionally getting the opportunity to go to Jericho, being allowed to leave through the Erez Crossing and during that time encountering a soldier, who was aged like him, I suppose about 19 or 20. He came back to me and said, 'Do you know what, James? The soldiers are the same age as me.' He'd never had any idea, he'd seen soldiers at a distance, perhaps in armoured vehicles, perhaps in concrete watchtowers, but he'd never had this face-to-face contact. I think that really comes to, in the film, it's one of the things which is absent.

To focus on children to... my abiding memories from my time in Gaza, are also based upon children and I'm going to tell them because these too are things which have stayed with me. I remember one evening, during a time of intense Israeli military activity, there had been a number of assassination attempts against leaders of Hamas. I remember taking a walk in one of the main squares in Gaza and along the side of this, there was a row of shops, among which was a toy shop.

I remember seeing a father looking in the window, with a little boy in each hand and there were obviously looking at a football which became clear to me, they couldn't afford. It seemed to me, sometimes you saw some terrible things and I reported on conflicts, not just in the Middle East, but elsewhere in the world. Sometimes I think it's the very small things, these tiny frustrations, that the father didn't have a couple of dollars or whatever it was to buy the football for these children. But this contributes to the sense of being dispossessed, of alienation. I actually considered buying the football for this man, but I thought that would have embarrassed him, so I just walked on and just left it at that.

But I remember too, and talking about the change in generations, I used to park my car, which was a white car with press written on it, so it stood out a mile, as indeed I did in the place, I had red hair then. I was clearly northern European in appearance, where everybody else in the one point however many million had black hair. So I did stand out a little bit. There was a young lad, who I guess was about seven or eight, who introduced himself to me as Mohammed and he used to chat to me whenever I parked my car, because he wanted to practise his English, he was beginning to learn English in school and at often wondered what happened to him subsequently.

I suppose he'd be about 20 now. Did he take up arms? Did he try to find his way forward through education or is he perhaps one of the casualties that we read about last year? The reason I mention these things is because there are isolated examples, but I think which stand for much wider things.

So I return to why children? Well, I think because in the situation, without a peace process, without, at the moment, political inspiration or indeed perhaps political will, or indeed a solution only in the future can we expect change, and that's why I think, although the focus of the film is not particularly political, it is very instructive about the future political situation in that sense. At one point in her script, Lyse asks when and where will this anger go. I think at this point, I'd like to consider the universal significance, the wider significance of the film too.

I spent a lot of time covering the conflict in the North Caucasus particularly, Russia's war against separatists in Chechnya. That is, I'm sure most of you know, now settled after a fashion, although the leader of Chechnya now has what *The Economist* referred to this

week as a private army of some 20,000 and I think those of us who watch that part of the world too can see that conflict possibly flaring up again in the future. A prospect which *The Economist* raised to, in their article.

I think too of Anna Politkovskaya, the Russian journalist who so courageously covered that conflict, she saw some of the Russian army's methods there saying that all this does is create new terrorists and resistance fighters and I think these are the lessons here, when we see the anger in the young children. The point in Chechnya is that the generation who has children in the 1990s, saw their fathers and uncles being killed or wounded fighting the Russians and now themselves are military age. I wonder how many of them are in what *The Economist* called that private army belonging to Mr Kadyrov.

Mentioning one of the great chroniclers of modern conflict and Anna Politkovskaya brings me to my third and final series of remarks I'd like to make, which is the challenges of journalism, of covering this conflict. I would say here too, the importance. Lyse, we saw, was able to talk to people on both sides of the conflict. Something which they themselves are unable to do and something, which given the restrictions placed on many Western diplomats, they too are unable to do.

So I think this is a particular area in which journalism brings a value which other forms of activity are unable to do. Nowhere are there challenges, though, facing reporting conflict greater than in reporting this particular one. Scrutiny is immense, that's fair enough. There's also a lot of abuse, as you can imagine, anybody who goes into the public domains to discuss this conflict will set themselves up for that and of course, there's danger too. Obviously the number of civilians killed in this conflict is the overriding headline, but there were journalists who were killed too, on this occasion.

How to begin to tell this story, in a few hundred words for a newspaper, or a minute 45 for television. You have to combine history, you have to combine context, you have to combine the two views, the two narratives, or two ways the belligerents here tell their own stories. I think too... and this is something that has grown in the decade or more since I was there, I returned to Jerusalem and the West Bank twice last year for research of my forthcoming book. We hear and we saw in some similar sense that is expressed in some of the clips that we've just seen, one of the scenes that we haven't seen in these clips here, but I'm sure you'll see this evening, is a Hamas training camp for young men. The speaker at this rally says, 'We're going to hit the enemy and God will help us.'

You can find variations of that sentiment in Israel too. I think that the politics on both sides are becoming, religion is becoming a growing influence in both of them and that now is the sentiment which surrounds children on both sides. In doing so, it presents colossal challenges for journalism and indeed, for diplomacy.

### Jane Kinninmont

Thank you very much. We'll turn now to George Graham, who is the head of conflict and humanitarian policy and advocacy at Save the Children, leading the organization's work on various humanitarian crises, including those in Syria and in Yemen, with of course, a focus on the rights of the child.

## George Graham

Right, thank you very much Jane, and James and Lyse, and the BBC for giving us a sneak preview of that very powerful film. Just to kick off, I want to give a tiny bit of background about our work. Save the Children works in Gaza and has done for many years. We don't work in Israel, so a lot of what I'm going to say is drawn from my programme colleagues in Gaza. I have less to say about Israel, because I know less about how the conflict is playing out for Israeli children. That doesn't imply any bias I hope, on the part of Save the Children, that's just what I'm able to speak to.

As Jane has said, Save the Children starts from our touchstone, if you like, we start from the premise of the Convention of the Rights of the Child and the work we do globally, the purpose of it, is to help ensure that those rights are realized wherever those children live. It's, I think, very hard/impossible to separate out the job of how you fulfil those rights of children in Israel and Gaza from the politics of the situation in which they live. The impact on children's lives is directly linked to the failed political process in that area, in that region. Of the immediate impact of that failure, there are deaths, injuries, lost homes, lost schools, lost parents, lost siblings, every time the conflict escalates, we see the same pattern again.

The most recent war, last summer, claimed, as Jane said, 551 children's lives, 550 of whom were Palestinian. In addition, there is the continual severe psychological distress, years of missed education, trauma, physical degradation of the environment and the physical support that people rely on. The data I saw as I was preparing my notes last night – and I hope it's accurate, please correct me if it's not – 100,000 people in Gaza still homeless.

Of the 19,000 homes destroyed last summer, none have been rebuilt. Around 120,000 people still don't have access to running water. Most of the schools and hospitals are still yet to be repaired. Hundreds of children have a permanent disability, 1,500 children are estimated to have been orphaned. Around 7,000 explosive remnants of war, so things that go boom, are thought to be buried in the debris where children play and in the areas where they live.

This is in the context of the situation in Gaza under blockade for many years now, so pervasive deprivation and some of the impacts of which have been not only poverty, but also quite visceral things like malnutrition, poor healthcare. Also, as the film touches upon, a sense of hopelessness. I'm not sure you have a right to hope in the Convention of the Rights of the Child, but you should. Just to acknowledge, on the Israeli side of things, I've just given a litany of things on the Gaza side, clearly very high levels of justified fear amongst children on the Israeli side.

So in the short life, an experience of a child and particularly a child living in Gaza, I think as the film demonstrates, it must feel like living in some form of hell. So in April and May 2015, this year, Save the Children commissioned an assessment in Gaza, looking at the continued psychosocial impact of the crisis on school aged children. So children from the ages of 6 to 15, with the aim of then thinking through how we design an appropriate response to support their psychosocial needs.

The team was alarmed by unusually high levels of continued distress and trauma that they documented and this is almost a year after the conflict. It's important to know that while extreme symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder are evident in Gaza's child population, far more common are the more everyday manifestations of grief – continual fear and emotional distress that surfaced in our assessment. It's highly unusual for that sort of less intense, lesser affected children to continue to display that sort of less intense, but regular stress reaction so long after a traumatic event.

So a few headlines of the findings of that: on average seven out of 10 children in the worst hit areas of Gaza are suffering from regular nightmares. Some areas so severe that eight out of 10 children suffer nightmares every single night. I don't want to ham this up, but I've got a four year old and a two year old I couldn't really imagine having to deal with nightmares every single night. 75 per cent of the children in the worst hit areas are experiencing unusual bedwetting regularly. I'm talking about six-year-olds to 15-year-olds here, including a shocking 47 per cent experiencing bedwetting every night in one particularly badly affected area.

Up to 89 per cent of parents report their children suffering consistent feelings of fear, more than 70 per cent of children in the worst hit areas are worried about another war. More than half of children in some of the camps we surveyed don't want to go to school any more or they have very poor attendance and a smaller number of children demonstrating decreased motivation and listlessness.

We also know from the Israeli side, psychologists report evidence of trauma amongst Israeli children too and I should actually throw in one more caveat, which is this is not intended to be perceived or read as being robust scientific research. This is just programme analysis that our guys have done in order to design a programme. We're not claiming this to be the last word on the psychological impact of the conflict and situation on children.

What can we do to address this? I've got four recommendations. The first is the international community has a critical role to play in ensuring the welfare of children in Gaza and the realization of those rights. The rights to home, schools, opportunities granted to them under the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and at the moment we are collectively denying these rights to children in Gaza. So leaders have got to facilitate a reconstruction and ensure that those rights are fully upheld.

The UN, the quartet, the EU, the UK, numerous states have called for the blockade of Gaza to be lifted. That seems to me, to be absolutely essential to facilitate the rights of children, the right to move people and goods. While Gaza remains in a state where conflict feels imminent, which is partly a consequence of the blockade, the anxiety that is exhibited by these children won't be resolved, but also the wider fulfilment of their rights can't take place and, as I mentioned earlier, that business of hope. How do you give children hope when they can't see a future for themselves? There isn't any way viable.

My third point is that – the obvious one – parties to the conflict should prioritize a lasting peaceful, political solution, return to the negotiating table in good faith. The status quo is clearly untenable and without peace we cannot promise children in Israel, or in the occupied Palestinian territories, that the nightmare is truly over. And the fourth, more



immediately, to date the UN's plan for support to the occupied Palestinian territories remains underfunded by a shocking 68 per cent, with funding for the activities needed to help children recover emotionally and get back to school, severely lacking.

In Cairo, last year, I think it was October, the international community made a set of commitments to rebuilding Gaza and so far those commitments are yet to be realized. So a lot of work needs to be done.

### Jane Kinninmont

Thank you, George. We will now turn to Sami Abdel-Shafi, senior Asfari fellow on the Middle East and North Africa Programme here at Chatham House. Sami is with our programme for six months, as part of Chatham House's Academy for Leadership and International Affairs. Usually based in Gaza, he's been working with the Carter Centre there since 2008 and prior to that his background has been in business, particularly in the IT sector. Sami's research here focuses on European policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thank you, Sami.

### Sami Abdel-Shafi

Thank you, Jane, it's an honour to be at Chatham House, it's an honour to be with you, Jane and the members of the panel. Thank you so much to the members of the audience for taking the time to actually come. And thanks for the BBC for continuing to go to Gaza and to Israel to keep up the focus. That is not on top of people's lists these days, unfortunately. I have an inherent disadvantage and a bit of a mix-up because I am from Gaza, I was there during the events of the war, but I will be very natural in my comments. I would like to start with two points in one.

The very first is that those children we saw in the clips, they probably do realize, deep in their hearts, that the violence they experienced from the other side, with varying extents of course, did not come at them from children like them. They do clearly understand that and they do understand that it is adults on both sides who have disagreed unfortunately, in such a fashion that came down to a war.

Those children are growing up too quickly, obviously and they're not catching up with the innocence of their lives. Yet, on the other side, you have adults who have never experienced innocence because they have also grown up too fast. From experience, I'd like to tell you, even those traumatized and very hurt children, they at times, were the source of encouragement and inspiration to adults. It's just extraordinary how children have the ability to turn the page multiple times during a single day.

So if a household was shocked and awed by a massive bomb that had fell somewhere in the neighbourhood, you'd have children jumping in fear and adults more calm. And then the adults continued throughout the day, being very scared and extremely apprehensive, while children very shortly start to rejuvenate. The reason why I mention this is that this remarkable ability that children possess, it is exactly that that must be protected. We are very late in protecting it, but we must not lose sight of the fact that it exists. For that reason, I do not lose hope in children and I'm not losing hope in adults either. Which brings me to the third and final point.

My assumption is that we are interested in such documentaries and compilations to highlight the difficulties children go through as a result of events like this, because we want to protect this pure innocence, this unconditional sense of goodwill that children have, all of them. What I propose we should really look at is the fact that we shouldn't forget that adults also have a sense of goodwill. I even dare say that also adults have a sense of innocence which is deeply buried inside, because of all of the effects of years and because of the effects of what they saw in their lifetime.

I believe that part of our collective mission, going forward, is to recognize and build on this sense of goodwill. I do believe that there is quite a bit of goodwill in Israel. I certainly know that there is a huge amount of goodwill on the part of the Palestinians and we are being very selfishly picky about concentrating on the negative. I'm not saying this in a cliché fashion. Again, I live in Gaza and I was there and perhaps because of the negativity and the pain and the fear and the continuing effects, if you will, I'm confident of every word I say, by saying that we must protect people's goodwill and build upon it and there are ways.

Finally, I would like to close with one anecdote. There was a friend whose home was destroyed in the north of Gaza, so I invited him and his eight family members to move into part of our house in Gaza. They had moved into one of the schools, to seek shelter. That school was too crowded and the children started having skin infections because of lack of hygiene. So they moved. Then I gave them water, olive oil and tea.

Soon enough, my friend came to me and he was frank about the condition of his child. I'm not a doctor, I'm the son of one and a brother of one, so I became one by inference, if you will. So I 'prescribed' a certain ointment and a type of tablet I know that is not too bad for children. We were very lucky that was available at the pharmacy. I gave them instructions to use it for three days, that's what they did and the kid got much better.

From that point on, I became called a doctor and I became the fourth dermatologist in Gaza. The reason why I say this is that there is a lot in between, between what we see and what we hear in the news, there's a huge world of circumstances and challenges that people are put through, that we don't hear of outside of regions of conflict. That is also part of the reason why I believe that the world is taking too long to pay attention and to seek solutions for such problems. This is my biggest fear for the newer problems, like those in Syria and elsewhere in the world. We've got to do something. We're already late, but we are not late to a point of no return. Thank you so much.