

## **The influence of terrorist threats on Israeli children and adolescents**

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### **Abstract**

This article offers a review of some studies on the influence of the constant threat of terrorism on Israeli children and adolescents. Negative outcomes as well as mediating factors are examined in this context. Contributions from psychology and sociology are hereby included. Stress and fear have been the most common reactions found. However, the intensity and prevalence rate of both are in most cases relatively low. Gender, social systems and worldview/political attitude all serve as mediating factors. Even though much is already known, more research will likely lead to further understanding of the topic.

**Keywords:** threat of terrorism, Israeli children and adolescents, stress and fear, gender, social systems, worldview and political attitude.

### **Introduction**

Living under the threat of terrorism is perceived by many as a very stressful situation, one that has an impact on individuals' daily lives, policymaking, and a nation's perception of its own security. Terrorism has been defined as "politically motivated violence, perpetrated by individuals, groups or state-sponsored agents, intended to instill feelings of terror and helplessness in a population in order to influence decision-making and to change behavior" (Kashima, 2003; Moghaddam, 2005, in Tatar, Amram & Kelman, 2010). In Israel, the threat of terrorism is constantly present. Due to several conflicts in the Middle East in which Israel has been involved, especially with neighboring Palestine and Lebanon, terrorist attacks have become part of the Israeli life and society.

This article focuses on the influence of the constant threat of terrorism on Israeli children and adolescents by examining several recent studies on the topic. Negative outcomes as well as mediating factors will in this context be presented. To give an overview on the topic, both psychological as well as sociological perspectives are considered. The main question of this article is: How does the threat of terrorism influence

Israeli children and adolescents? First, a summary of the general situation in Israel will be provided. Next, negative impacts from the threat of terrorism on Israeli children and adolescents will be assessed. Then several mediating factors between the threat of terrorism and the influence on children and adolescents will be summarized. Specifically, the roles of gender, support from social systems, and political attitude and worldview will be evaluated. The conclusion of the article argues that the threat of terrorism indeed has a negative influence on Israeli children and adolescents, even though the majority seem to cope relatively well with the situation.

### **The presence of terrorism in the Israeli society**

It has been stated that: "In Israel, children and adolescents live in conditions of prolonged terror [for most of] their lives" (Sharlin, Moin & Yahav, 2006, p. 97). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has led to continuous terrorism in which citizens on both sides need to cope with an "ongoing, threatening situation on a daily basis" (Tatar et al., 2010 p. 133). The first Intifada in 1987, in which Palestinians rose in revolt in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, was followed by the second Intifada in October 2000 (Sharlin et al.,

2006). Since that time, terrorist attacks against the Israeli civilian population have taken place in which, according to the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2005, in Cohen & Eid, 2007), 930 people have been killed and more than 4000 have been injured. A characteristic of these terrorist attacks is that the majority of them have been carried out in public places. Consequently, as Cohen and Eid (2007) argue, "Israeli citizens almost everywhere live in a constant high-risk situation, ever conscious that they or their family members could be involved in a terror attack" (Cohen & Eid, 2007, p. 47). Sharlin et al. (2006) describes one such episode:

*In Jerusalem, 22 November 2002. Jerusalem's bus #20 exploded after a suicide bomber got on. The bus, which serves the residential areas, was full of children on their way to school. Eleven people were killed and 50 wounded (Sharlin et al., 2006, p. 100).*

What can be seen as a paradox in the Israeli situation is that daily life and its routines expose children and adolescents to a higher risk, whereas routines generally are seen as favorable because they provide a sense of stability in an unstable situation (Cohen & Eid, 2007). Making use of public transportation or enjoying entertainment brings people into a situation where the risk of being exposed to a terrorist attack is higher. However, research shows that the majority of the population has not been directly exposed. In a study in which 512 participants forming a representative sample of the Israeli population were surveyed, 16.4 % of Israelis had been directly exposed to a terrorist attack (Bleich et al., 2003, in Sharlin et al., 2006). However, due to the circumstances described above, most Israeli citizens perceive that they are in close proximity to the terrorist attacks (Cohen & Eid, 2007).

### **Negative outcomes as a result of terrorist threats**

The mental health literature indicates that populations living under the threat of terrorism have a "high risk [of] developing symptoms of distress" (Summerfield, 1997, in Kimhi & Shamai, 2006, p. 2). Generalized fear and anxiety, problems in daily functioning, recurrent thoughts of a terrorist attack, avoidance behavior, psychological symptoms, depression, and difficulties in relating to and trusting others are the major symptoms that have been identified. In severe cases, post-traumatic stress disorder<sup>1</sup> (PTSD) can result from exposure to terrorist attacks (Gidron et al., 1999; Solomon et al., 1991; Summerfield, 1997, in Kimhi & Shamai, 2006). Within the context of Israel, researchers have studied the influence of the constant threat of terrorism on Israeli children and adolescents by surveying both this age group and their parents. A selection of recent studies will now be discussed.

Tatar et al. (2011) studied the perceptions of Israeli parents concerning the help-seeking behaviors of their 11 to 19 year-old children in relation to terrorist attacks. A total of 684 parents were surveyed (342 mothers and 342 fathers). Additionally, parents were asked to address the most common reactions in their children following a terrorist attack. The results show that parents perceive the following as typical reactions: stress, fear, emotional avoidance, sadness, attempts to receive more information or details about the event, and anger or a wish for revenge. The most common reaction, as perceived by the parents, was stress.

In Cohen and Eid's (2007) study of the effect of living under conditions of an ever-present threat of terrorism, the level of stress symptoms in Israeli Jewish and Arab adolescents was examined. A total of 346 adolescents aged 13 to 15 years, of whom 170 were Israeli Jews and 176 were Israeli Arabs, participated in the

study. The results show that Israeli Jewish and Arab adolescents' levels of stress were very similar. Most adolescents of the Jewish and Arab group showed zero-to-low (17.6% and 22.9%) or mild stress reactions (75.3% and 69.7%). Moderate stress reactions were less frequent (7.1% and 7.4%) and no severe stress reaction was reported in either group. It was found that neither watching television nor proximity to a terrorist attack was associated with stress symptoms. Likewise, Sharlin et al. (2006) found that children living in a community where a terrorist attack had occurred did not have much stronger reactions to the occurrence of a subsequent attack, independent of where in the country the attack occurred, than children living elsewhere. This last finding can be understood in terms of the fact that most Israeli citizens feel that they are in close proximity to attacks that take place, whether or not they are directly exposed (as described above). The very small geographical area of Israel may also account for such a perception.

However, somewhat contrary to the findings of Cohen and Eid (2007) and Sharlin et al. (2006), Shamai & Kimhi (2006) found that teenagers living in an area with a high risk of terrorist attacks did indeed have a higher level of stress, as well as a lower level of satisfaction with their lives, than teenagers living in areas with a lower risk of attacks. The study was conducted among 419 teenagers living in two residential areas; the northern area (considered to be a high risk region due to its proximity to the Israeli-Lebanese border) and the central area (lower risk of attacks due to its larger distance from the border). In another study among 992 adults living in the northern or central areas, the same result was found (Shamai, Kimhi & Enosh, 2007). It can thus be concluded that, when living in an area of high risk, inhabitants feel more vulnerable than the population

in general, and thus experience higher levels of stress and fear.

As described above, generalized fear has been found to be a typical result of living under conditions of constant threat of terrorism. Sharlin et al. (2006) studied prevalence and intensity of fear in 747 Israeli junior high school students. Even though none of the students had been directly exposed to a terrorist attack, they all lived under a continuous threat of terrorism. The study sought to determine whether an occurring terrorist attack, in conditions of prolonged terror, has an influence on children's reactions. Results show that prevalence and intensity of fear was relatively low among the majority of the students. Additionally it was found that children's fear was not significantly higher after a new terrorist attack. Nevertheless, the results indicate that 10% to 19% of the children reported to be "very" or "very much" afraid and 64% were "afraid" of suicide bombers. Most children were aware of the danger of new attacks. Even so, the threat of terrorism did not seem to hamper their everyday activities and, in most cases, did not weaken their learning ability and concentration at school. No more than 5% of the children reported that they thought a lot about terrorism. Considering the situation these children are in, the results seem somewhat surprising. However, the findings reported in this paper are consistent with the other studies examined above in showing that most children are affected by terrorism, even though the overall level of fear is relatively low.

### **The influence of gender**

Literature on gender differences in relation to war and terror suggest that women and girls seem to have higher levels of stress than men and boys (Kimhi & Shamai, 2006). Kimhi and Shamai (2006) applied this to the Israeli context by looking at gender differences in stress

reactions to the threat of terrorism in a sample of 353 teenagers (a sample of 890 adults was also included but will not be discussed here). The results confirm that there indeed is a gender difference in reactions to the threat of terrorism, with girls reporting both a higher level of stress in relation to the withdrawal from Lebanon than boys, as well as more pronounced psychological symptoms. Nonetheless, the differences were rather small. When considering the overall wellbeing (i.e., life satisfaction) no significant difference was found. Sharlin et al. (2006) also recognize the influence of gender in reactions to terrorism: "It is well known that reaction to war and terrorism typically varies by (...) gender: girls report greater fear than do boys (...)" (Sharlin et al., 2006, p. 99). The results of the study conducted by Cohen and Eid (2007), as described earlier, also found a gender difference in relation to stress symptoms, with girls reporting higher levels of stress symptoms than boys. There thus seems to be consensus in the different studies conducted when it comes to differences between girls and boys in relation to stress as a result of the threat of terrorist attacks.

But why does the threat of terrorism have a different impact on girls and boys? In this context, Kimhi and Shamai (2006) refer to traditional gender roles becoming more pronounced when there is a threat of terrorist attacks. The authors assume that boys, due to upcoming army service in which they will serve in combat roles, already have been "socialized" not to express stress and fear in response to the threat of terrorism. Boys are thus expected to control their fearful thoughts and emotions while this is less true for girls. However, as Kimhi and Shamai point out, the finding that gender differences in stress reactions are rather small can be explained by the fact that gender roles in Israeli society in general have become less sharply defined over the

last decade. The authors furthermore suggest that social processes can influence differences in girls' and boys' reactions.

### **The important role of social systems**

Various studies have shown that social systems influence the level of stress, either in one direction or the other (Hobfoll, 2001; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1996, in Shamai et al., 2007). Furthermore, as Shamai et al. (2007) note, social systems, when viewed in terms of resources, can influence reactions to stress. Following the same line of argument, some scholars view the role of near social support systems, such as the family, as a mediating factor between a stressor and its impact (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Hobfoll, 2001, in Tater et al., 2011). Additionally, Brookmeyer, Henrich, Cohen and Shahar (2010) propose that "social support may buffer the link between" witnessing violence (e.g. terrorist attacks) and later violent behavior (Brookmeyer et al., 2010, p. 581). Central social systems which can provide Israeli children and adolescents with support include parents, school, and peer groups.

Tatar et al. (2011) studied parental perceptions of Israeli adolescents' help-seeking behavior following a terrorist attack. Their study sample comprised 684 Jewish parents who completed a self-report questionnaire. According to the results, 35% of the parents reported that their adolescent children "had turned to them for help after a terrorist attack"; 11% reported that their children had turned to their friends for support; 1% reported using mental health professionals for support; and 18% reported that their adolescents did not turn to anyone (Tatar et al., 2011, p. 137). Furthermore, emotional support (57%), informational support (15%) and professional support in the form of psychological or medical help (10%), respectively, were mentioned by the parents. Additionally parents stressed that they themselves as well as the school

should form “safe places where their children can feel secure” (Tatar et al., 2011, p. 139), and thought that teachers and school counselors should play a central role in cases in which reactions to an attack were more severe.

Additionally, Shamai et al. (2007) found that social systems indeed were a mediator between the level of threat and stress reactions in their Israeli adult sample. However, in a study of 353 Israeli adolescents, Shamai and Kimhi (2007) found that, even though the adolescents in the study reported high levels of support from family and friends – which was positively correlated with life satisfaction - this was not significantly related to level of stress. Furthermore, Cohen and Eid (2007) suggest that higher global stress reaction symptoms were found among adolescents about whom parents gave more information, and in families where more feelings were shared.

This leads to an important issue concerning the potential effectiveness of social support in situations in which people live under the threat of terrorism. As argued by Tatar et al. (2011), parents themselves are influenced by terrorist attacks and have often experienced strong negative emotions. The results of the study by Shamai and Kimhi (2007) showed that, when adolescents perceive their parents and friends to be more stressed by the situation, they themselves have higher levels of stress. Perceived stress of parents and friends thus has a stronger influence on the adolescents’ level of stress than the support given by them. The study of adults by Shamai et al. (2007) similarly showed that the stress attributed to significant others had the largest impact on psychological symptoms and life satisfaction.

### **Worldview and political attitudes**

It has been suggested that worldview and political attitudes influence the relationship between terrorism and its

impact on adolescents. Some even point to the possibility of a positive outcome following a traumatic event, namely “post-traumatic growth” (PTG). Growth here implies the exposed person’s “perception of personal benefits, including changes in the perception of self, relationships with others, and philosophy of life” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, in Laufer, Solomon & Levine, 2010, p. 647). Laufer et al. (2010) studied the role of religiosity and political ideology, which they both see as forms of “world views which provide values, a way of life, and ethically appropriate behavior” in relation to growth following trauma among youth (Laufer et al., 2010, p. 648). A total of 2,999 Israeli adolescents participated in their study. The results show that both variables are associated with growth. Both religiosity and ideology mediate the effects of both fear and exposure to terrorism on growth. The authors suggest that this may be the case since “the cultural worldviews reduce the incomprehensibility of the traumatic event, sustain self worth, or even offer the believer symbolic immortality, [and] thus reduce vulnerability” (Laufer et al., 2010, p. 651).

In their study of adolescents living in the northern and the central areas of Israel, Shamai and Kimhi (2006) found that those who were willing to accept a political compromise had both lower levels of stress and higher levels of life satisfaction. The authors assume that one’s attitude towards political compromise is related to the way one views the world. In this connection, the authors assumed that “teenagers who develop a worldview that allows for political compromise, within a context of political hardship, are more flexible in their attitude toward the enemy” (Shamai & Kimhi, 2006, p. 174). For this reason, they manage to cope better with the situation than teenagers opposing political compromise and having more static views

of the enemy. Cohen and Eid (2007), who examined the influence of the threat of terrorism on Israeli Arab and Jewish adolescents, supported the view that living under conditions with a continuous threat of terrorism had “a major impact on children, regardless of the political view of the conflict within the setting of the terrorist attacks” (Cohen & Eid, 2007, p. 56).

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined the impact of the constant threat of terrorism on Israeli children and adolescents by considering recent contributions on the topic. With regard to negative outcomes as a result of the threat of terrorism, stress and fear were found to be the most common reactions in Israeli children and adolescents. However, in most cases the intensity and prevalence of both was reported to be rather low. Most children seem to be brave in their everyday activities, even though the prolonged terrorism in Israel has led to a situation in which the risk of being exposed is constantly present. Basic resilience and adjustment capacities seem to be present in Israeli children and adolescents, as proposed by Cohen and Eid (2007). It is important to note the limitations of the research reported here. The reviewed studies were all based on self-report surveys in which some of the proposed constructs were difficult to measure, especially among the target group. Socially desirable answers are also likely to have influenced the results to some extent. Furthermore, causal relationships are precluded in the cross-sectional designs. Future research on this topic should therefore try other designs in order to further contribute to the understanding of the influence of the threat of terrorism on (Israeli) children and adolescents.

Gender, social systems and worldview/political attitude are all mediating factors between the threat of

terrorism and the influence on Israeli children and adolescents. Girls have higher levels of stress and fear than boys. Parents, friends, teachers and school counselors are all important sources of support. However, perceived stress in social systems seems to have a greater influence on stress and fear among children and adolescents than support that is provided. Moreover, the literature suggests that worldviews and political attitudes can provide adolescents with a deeper understanding of the situation, as well as a reduced vulnerability, leading to better coping or even positive outcomes as in the case of post-traumatic growth. However, other scholars argue that the threat of terrorism has a major influence on Israeli children and adolescents, irrespective of the political view they hold of the conflict.

### **An interdisciplinary perspective**

This article attempted to review some of the research on Israeli children and adolescents in the context of the constant threat of terrorism under which they live. Both sociological as well as psychological contributions to this topic were considered. Within the social sciences, various perspectives on humans and the society they live in have emerged, in the form of distinct disciplines analyzing the subject in question within their distinct respective contexts. The different disciplines emphasize different topics, factors, and ideas in their attempt to offer a better understanding of humans and the social world. The questions asked and how they are being studied is largely dependent on the disciplinary background from which they have emerged.

An interdisciplinary approach to the influence of the threat of terrorism on Israeli children and adolescents was employed in order to provide multiple perspectives of the issue. A consideration of aspects of Israeli children and adolescents themselves as well as their

social networks and the broader societal context were included. Psychological reactions such as stress and fear have been highlighted as well as the influence of gender, social support, worldviews, and political attitudes. It is believed that this interdisciplinary perspective has contributed to a broader understanding of the topic. However, many questions remain regarding the influence of the threat of terrorism on Israeli children and adolescents, and it is acknowledged that the “interdisciplinarity” of this review article is rather limited. More disciplines and perspectives than those considered here, such as pedagogical, cultural-anthropological and even historical perspectives, would likely offer further insights and knowledge.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup>Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder classified in the DSM-IV-TR as a severe anxiety disorder. PTSD can manifest itself after exposure to a severe stressful event perceived by an individual as traumatic (DSM-IV-TR, 2000).

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