Broadening the discourse about martyrdom television programming

By Yael Warshel

Spring, 2009. Martyrdom programs encourage the use of violence such as suicide bombings to manage situations of political conflict, and make claims to religion as a justification for adopting such strategies. International interest in and critique of such television programs culminated in 2007 when Hamas-owned al-Aqsa Television featured a Mickey Mouse lookalike character named Farfour in its children's program, *Pioneers of Tomorrow.* Implicit in the attention paid to this program was the assumption that such violence promoting messages were having a major impact on Palestinian children. Although this assertion might seem reasonable, it was not supported by my field research on Palestinian children's television consumption habits, their parents' related opinions and family practices around the television set. The content and production of these programs are no doubt problematic in their own right. However, my research, which widens the scope of intellectual discourse on this topic by taking into account audiences, suggests that martyrdom programs were not causing Palestinian children to adopt violence, in this case, against Jews, or specifically Jewish-Israelis. This is because Palestinian children were not tuning in to such programming.

Content and production of martyrdom programs

Pioneers of Tomorrow has been widely criticized, namely for advocating violence against Jews and an Islamic *umma* in territorial terms. A wide array of news media outlets around the world and media monitoring organizations alike took notice of the program because they assumed the contents of the program were having harmful effects on their target audience of Palestinian children.[1]

The most prominent example among them was the MEMRI TV Monitor project, which carefully and diligently translated and catalogued relevant segments from the program. The controversy surrounding the program spawned a Wikipedia page devoted entirely to it and several YouTube clips. Thus, contrary to media monitoring organization's efforts over the last few years to raise awareness about the existence in Arab and Islamic media of incitement programs such as martyrdom[2] and anti Jewish programming[3] - including those intended for or featuring children[4] - these organizations now managed to successfully create an international discourse around the subject.

Much of the criticisms leveled against the *contents* of *Pioneers of Tomorrow* are appropriate. Its message campaign, like other martyrdom programs, condones and advocates violent non-conciliation, in this case as the strategy Palestinian children should pursue towards peace-making with Jewish-Israelis. In addition, it encourages the establishment of a *territorial* Islamic *umma*, or a single institutional ideational variant that is coterminous with the transnational existence of Islam across the world system. The program encourages the establishment of such a political unit – essentially an empire[5] – at the expense of the entire world or inter-state system[6], including Israel,[7] and like other anti-Jewish programs, advocates the adoption of *prejudice* against Jews on the basis of their religious identity.[8]

The themes of *Pioneers of Tomorrow*, like other martyrdom programs targeting children do not constitute positive approaches to child development. Instead of trying to teach children nonviolence, and, more specifically, conflict-resolution skills as mechanisms for dealing with the reality of their conflict-ridden lives, martyrdom programs promote the development and use of violence.

As a matter of clarification, I am not arguing that martyrdom programs are harmful to children's development because they teach them about conflict. Palestinian children, like other children who live in zones of conflict, are already aware of conflict, given that it is part and parcel of their daily lives. Palestinian children readily experience conflict as both its *victims*[9] and *participants*.[10] Rather, I argue that the approach of these television programs to discussing and responding to the existence of conflict is problematic.

Using martyrdom programs to teach children how to approach their existing political conflict through violence, rather than strategies of non-violence that are known to benefit their development, is therefore, problematic and harmful. In contrast to violent strategies, non-violent strategies, or conflict resolution skills, have been found to foster the positive development of children. Such positive aspects of development include the promotion of critical thinking skills, problem-solving techniques,[11] improved academic performance,[12] leadership skills[13] and self-confidence.[14] In this respect, the agenda of television producers of martyrdom programs does not bode well for fostering healthy approaches to the development of Palestinian children, whom, in the first place, are suffering from the ramifications of growing up in a zone of conflict.[15]

The *production* of martyrdom programs is important when making an assessment of television professionals' intended aims. I do not have a concrete statistical count of the total number of martyrdom programs produced by Palestinian media professionals, nor in any way, argue these represent the bulk of Palestinian programming, including specifically for children.[16] Nevertheless, the existence of such a television genre is a problematic component of Palestinian media production, as too of any other groups who produce such contents. At the same time, however, a discourse that is set squarely on *contents* and only on the contents of such media products is too narrow.

Reception and effects

Critics of Palestinian martyrdom programming have framed their analysis of the contents of these programs as concern for the adverse effects of such programming on Palestinian children.[17] However, despite such a framing, the critics have not included Palestinian children into their analysis. Therefore, the agenda about martyrdom programming, as it has become configured, lacks the voice of Palestinian children. As a result, the question of whether these programs are indeed having a harmful *effect,* has not been addressed. So too, whether and what television programming Palestinian children consume, and what role, if any, these play more broadly in their lives, has been overlooked.

Critics assumed that media contents were having a direct social-psychological effect on viewers or would be popularly interpreted as such. By tuning in to Palestinian martyrdom programs, the assumption was that Palestinian children would become inspired or even trained in violence, for example in how to carry out suicide bombings against Jewish-Israelis as a direct result of these programs.[18]

However, none of the critics provided evidence attesting to the influence of Palestinian martyrdom programs on Palestinian children. They did not point to survey data supporting their assertion that Palestinian children were actually watching these programs. Second, they did not support their viewpoints with *audience reception* data showing how, if the children were watching, they were interpreting these messages. Third, they also failed to cite *media effects* research showing how, if the children were tuning in, their behaviors were being impacted by their assumed exposure to these programs. In short, the onus to prove such claims, at present, still remains with the critics.

Meanwhile, ample evidence about media reception demonstrates that television programs are interpreted polysemically. Viewers – whether they are adults or children – interpret programs in ways that diverge from producers' original intentions.[19] In addition, as demonstrated in an exhaustive meta-analysis, messages do not have direct effects on peoples' behaviors.[20] Children tuning in to a television program might interpret and, in turn, act on a program's message in a manner opposite from what its producers intended. Thus, the critics did not provide evidence for their assumption that martyrdom programs cause Palestinian children to adopt violence. In addition, they went against the grain of established empirical evidence about the reception and impact of televised messages.

Data on Palestinian children's viewing habits and practices

In an effort to address the claims about whether martyrdom programs have harmful effects on the lives of Palestinian children, I am bringing to bear evidence I have collected about Palestinian children's television viewing habits, uses and practices. To the best of my knowledge, my study is the first to provide empirical evidence about Palestinian children's television uses and practices, and moreover, any Arab children.

Therefore, my study addresses controversies that heretofore, have been discussed devoid of systematic data. In turn, I hope my study helps provide insight into broader questions concerning what role, if any, television plays in the lives of Palestinian children.

My data are derived from two and a half years of fieldwork conducted between 2004 and 2006, comprising a sample of over 400 Palestinians in the Palestinian Authority and Israel. This data collection was part of a larger study I conducted concerning the role of media in ameliorating and fomenting political conflict, which also included Jewish-Israelis in the sample. I selected the sample randomly at the community level from across the West Bank, Gaza and Israel. As part of my fieldwork I administered home-based surveys and conducted multi-sited ethnography. The former addressed the children's television and electronic game consumption habits, and their parents' opinions about these. I conducted the latter within homes across several communities with the goal of obtaining a more holistic view of children's uses of television in the context of daily family life. I observed family practices around the television set, including during my visits to family homes where my research assistants and/or I, administered the home-based surveys. As a separate part of the field research, I viewed programs mentioned by respondents. In this article I discuss the viewing habits and practices of Palestinian children in the Palestinian Authority and Israel, as these relate to their parents' knowledge of these habits and practices, and my related observations.

Above all else, my data show that Palestinian children negotiate the available options by choosing to tune into global, rather than local television channels. Their favorite channels, to which the overwhelming majority have access, are available only via satellite. These channels include, in order of preference, Spacetoons, the Saudi-owned Arab Radio and TV Network Channel 3 (ARTeenz) and Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) Channel 3.

Their favorite programs are also global, not local. They consume American, Japanese and pan-Arab television far more than any other programs, including local Palestinian shows. The programs they commonly tune into include, *Conan*, *Sandy Bell* (especially favored by girls) the Japanese *Pokeman*, *Captain Majid*, *Sindibad,* *Tarzan, Beyblade, Adnan and Lina, Captain Rabih,* a host of Syrian films, *Star Academy* and the mini-series *Palestinian Tragedy.*[21] Rotana Clip music video clips were also popular; children excitedly reported watching the Lebanese singer Haifa. In total, when asked, the children never cited programs flagged by MEMRI as being part of the martyrdom, or for that matter, anti-Jewish genre, as programs they watched. In addition, when I surveyed them about their favorites, they neither mentioned these programs. In short, above all else, these children reported that they consume global channels and programs, not local Palestinian programs, nor for that matter, martyrdom and anti-Jewish shows.

The number one television program Palestinian children consume is the American produced *Tom and Jerry*. I asked children why they watched this program, and/or rated it as their favorite. In an effort to answer why she loved *Tom and Jerry* children like Najwa, for example, explained. She said that the program is "nice." I like it, "when they

chase each other." And similarly, Rafah explained his attraction to the program to me, gleefully stating "[Tom, the cat] wants to catch him [Jerry, the mouse] so he can eat him!"

Palestinian children's television practices within the family sphere

In spite of concerns raised about Palestinian children consuming locally produced martyrdom programs, these children instead reported watching global programs. In addition, as my ethnographic research revealed, they, not their parents, made the decision about what they watched. In other words, by including Palestinian children's voices into the debate about these programs, it appears that if there is any genre of programming, or moreover, any one single television program that is *potentially* influencing Palestinian children it is *Tom and Jerry* - what Palestinian children reported watching most frequently.

Furthermore, as my discussions with parents and observations of family practices around the television set revealed, parental mediation of these children's television consumption habits is not common. The children reported on the programs *they* chose to watch. Though parents typically indicated to me that, "I always know what my child watches," when I began asking them about specific programs – even just their names – parents were unable to provide me with details. Instead, I had to turn to their children for specifics.

Parents were typically surprised by their children's extensive knowledge of all the various television program offerings and corresponding channels their children mentioned to me during the home-based survey, and which they also observed alongside me during my field inquiries. Among the older children in my sample - seven and eight year olds - parents were surprised that these children could both verbalize the numbers for these channels and were correct when identifying on which channel a given television program aired. With respect to the younger children - five and six year olds - parents were surprised by their ability to demonstrate on what button on the family's TV set, or accompanying remote, they had to press in order to surf channels, or as even further surprised them, when they managed to select the exact channel where their favorite programs aired. In short, these children - as has been well-established about children elsewhere in the world[22] - controlled their television consumption habits, amidst wider family practices.

The question of media effects of martyrdom programming

Thus, with respect to the topic of Palestinian children's television consumption *habits,* television was not *affecting* these children in such a way as to cause them to adopt violent strategies as a direct result of exposure to the *contents* of martyrdom programs. This is because these children were not, in the first place, tuning in.

Thus, it would seem, the attention generated around the Palestinian martyrdom programming controversy had nothing to do with television's effect on Palestinian

children's own personal development. Second, the entire controversy took place in a public sphere separate from children. It took place, as most debates about children do, in the adult public sphere, where only adult opinions were sought, and in this case, only those lacking scientific evidence about the actual audience members. Adults debated the programming, but did so, it seems, while forgetting to check in with children about whether they watched these television programs in the first place.

Said another way, criticisms of Palestinian martyrdom programs, framed as a concern for Palestinian children, ultimately have not addressed the lives of Palestinian children. They have not addressed what role television plays within the lives of Palestinian children who live in a context pervaded by ongoing conflict, and to what use, if any, these children put television within such a context.

Above all else, Palestinian children consume global programming, including pan-Arab, American and Japanese programming, and most especially *Tom and Jerry*, not martyrdom or other incitement, including anti-Jewish programs. In light of these findings, I recommend those interested in Palestinian children's television consumption habits now ask – where data are available – meaning for five to eight year olds; how are Palestinian children interpreting and being influenced by these programs, and most especially *Tom and Jerry?* How are they using *this* television program to make sense of their conflict-ridden lives? Answers to such questions would further help locate what role, if any, television is playing within the lives of Palestinian children.

Conclusion

While, as the critics assumed, Palestinian martyrdom programs may be adversely influencing Palestinian children, such a contention must be supported using a scientific approach to data collection. It is extremely tempting to assume that Palestinian children are watching these programs and being directly influenced by them. Data supporting this contention would be a welcome addition to our intellectual understanding of this controversy. Indeed, I hope more scholars broaden the discourse about martyrdom programs and incitement programs more generally by beginning to conduct media and conflict-based research *with* audiences. However, at present, the only empirical evidence supplied about influence on Palestinian children points in the opposite direction. Therefore, given this evidence, for now, we should be focusing our attention on understanding how *Palestinian children* interpret and are influenced by what we at least do *know* they are tuning into: *Tom and Jerry*.

Yael Warshel *is an Assistant Professor in International Communication and Associate Faculty in International Peace and Conflict Resolution in the School of International Service at American University.*

[1] To name just a few of the news outlets that covered the television program see:

Stahl, J. (May 09, 2007). "Hamas may revise jihad-promoting 'Mickey Mouse Program." *Cybercast News Service*.

Hadid, D. (May 8, 2007). "Hamas 'Mickey Mouse' wants Islam takeover." AP.

Shubert, A. (May 15, 2007). "Hamas kids TV show with militant mouse to air Friday." CNN.

AFP. (May 10, 2007). "Hamas TV refuses to Axe copycat Mickey Mouse." News.sawf.org.

BBC News. (June 30, 2007) "Hamas 'Mickey Mouse' killed off: A Palestinian TV station has killed off a controversial Mickey Mouse look alike that critics said was spreading anti-US and anti-Israeli messages to children," *BBC*.

Spiegel Online International. (May 9, 2007) "Hamas Mickey Mouse Teaches Jihad." *Spiegel Online International*.

Smith, Stephen. (May 11, 2007)."Hamas 'Mickey Mouse' Back On The Air. Children's TV: Character Teaching Anti-Israel Messages To Palestinian Kids Returns Despite Protests." CBS.

AP. (June 29, 2007). "Hamas TV show kills militant mouse character." www.CNN.com.

Bazelon, Emily (2007) "Watching Holy Land Sesame Street." *Slate Magazine*.

Hannity and Colmes. (October 15, 2007) "Shocking Video: Hamas Recruits Toddlers for Terror Campaign." Fox News.

See also as examples of the media monitoring organizations that flagged it as an example of incitement programming: Marcus, I. and Crook, B. (May 14, 2007). "Hamas Mickey Mouse creator: Islamic rule will benefit Christians and Jews." Palestinian Media Watch.

MEMRI TV Project. (April 13, 2007). "A Mickey Mouse Character on Hamas TV Teaches Children about Islamic Rule of the World." MEMRI TV Monitor Project transcript.

[2] See MEMRI TV's martyrdom subjects section archive including, for example a program featuring Sheik Ahmad al-Qattan on the Islamic religious channel Iqra in 2004, promoting martyrdom as a childrearing practice to parents.

[3] Anti-Jewish programs encourage the adoption of negative intergroup attitudes, or prejudice and discrimination against Jews on the basis of their religious identity.

[4] See MEMRI TV's antisemitism documentation subjects section related archive, including for example an anti-Jewish incitement program featuring a child broadcast on Iqra in 2002.

[5] For a discussion that differentiates between types of political units within the world system, including by comparing and contrasting empires with states, see Spruyt, H. (1994) *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[6] I use the term "inter-state system" as an adaptation of a term used by Lars-Erik Cederman to describe the puzzle-like matrix that currently houses the world's people. Cederman points out that terms like *international relations,* or as is appropriate for my current usage, *international system*, are really misnomers. In institutional terms, the world is currently divided into states, not nations. Cederman, L.-E.(1997). *Emergent Actors in World Politics. How States and Nations Develop and Dissolve.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

7 See Spruyt (p. 180) for an interesting discussion about how the inter state system "imposes structural limits on the type of units that are possible and will be recognized by the other actors as legitimate forms of organization in international politics." This discussion sheds light on the challenges a non-state institution, such as a territorial *umma*, would pose to the system. It helps to explain why, apart from the ethnopolitically religious exclusivist identity an *umma* presupposes – in essence foisting upon all the identity of one - its emergence would be problematic for the existence of all states across the inter-state system. Spruyt, H. (1994). Ibid note # 4.

[8] For a discussion about Hamas's related political ideology, see Litvak, M. "The Anti-Semitism of Hamas." *Palestine-Israel Journal*. 12 (2 & 3), 2005. 41-52.

[9] Nixon, E., Bing-Canar, A and Bing-Canar J. (1990) "Status of Palestinian Children during the Uprising in the Occupied Territories." Part I: (1 & 2) Child Death and Injury.

Nashef, Y. (1992). *The Psychological Impact of the Intifada on Palestinian Children living in Refugee Camps in the West Bank as Reflected in their dreams, drawings and behavior.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Quota, S, Punamaki, R.-L. and El Sarraj, E. (1995). "The Relations Between Traumatic Experiences, Activity, and Cognitive and Emotional Responses Among Palestinian Children." *International Journal of Psychology*. 30 (3) 289-304.

Garbarino, J and K. Kostelny. (1996) "The effects of political violence on Palestinian children's behavior problems: A risk accumulation model." *Child Development*. 67. Pp. 33-45.

Quota, S, Punamaki, R.-L. and El Sarraj, E. (1997). "House demolition and mental health: Victims and witnesses." *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*. 6 (3). 203-211.

Amnesty International (2002, October). "Israel and the Occupied Territories and the Palestinian Authority. Killing the Future: Children in the Line of Fire." London: Amnesty International Publications.

Defense for Children International/Palestine Section. (2004). "Status of Palestinian Children's Rights: Israeli's violations of the right to life and security and the rights of children deprived of their liberty during the second intifada" (20 September 2000-30 June 2004).

[10] Nashef, Y. (1992). Ibid note # 8.

Barber, B. K. (1997). "Palestinian children and adolescents during and after the intifada." *Palestine-Israel Journal*, 4 (1), 23–33.

Kuttab, D. (1998, Spring). "A profile of the stonethrowers" [Electronic version]. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 17(3), 14–23.

Kuttab, J. (1998, Summer). "The children's revolt" [Electronic version]. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 17(4), 26–35.

Rouhana, K. (1989, Summer). "Children and the intifadah" [Electronic version]. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 18(4), 110–121.

Quota, S, Punamaki, R.-L. and El Sarraj, E. (1995). "The Relations Between Traumatic Experiences, Activity, and Cognitive and Emotional Responses Among Palestinian Children." *International Journal of Psychology*. 30 (3) 289-304.

Defense for Children International/Palestine Section. (2004). Ibid note # 8.

[11] See Van Slyck, M.. Stern, M. and Zak-Place, J. (July 1996). "Promoting Optimal Adolescent Development Through Conflict Resolution Education, Training, and Practice: An Innovative Approach for Counseling Psychologists." *The Counseling Psychologist.* 24 (3) 433-461.

[12] Johnson and Johnson, 1994 cited in Van Slyck, Stern & Zak-Place, 1996. Ibid note #10.

[13] Van Slyck, M.R. and Stern, M. (1991). "Conflict resolution in educational settings: Assessing the Impact of Peer Mediation Programs". In K. Duffy, P. Olczak & J. Grosch (Eds.). *The Art and Science of Community Mediation: A Handbook for Practitioners and Researchers*, pp. 257-274. NY: Guilford.

[14] Wagner, W. (1996). "Facilitating Optimal Development in Adolescents and Introductory Remarks." *The Counseling Psychologist*. 24, pp. 357-359.

[15] The empirical literature on conflict resolution strategies and children draws upon the relationship between individual level interpersonal conflicts and child development. From an area studies perspective, one might, therefore, criticize the use of this literature in application to political conflicts. However, despite such a caveat, activists like Mubarak Awad have made cogent arguments that in fact claim these very same strategies as appropriate. The best strategies Palestinians can adopt for resolving political conflict, according to Awad, are strategies of non-violence, and the teaching of these values. See Awad, M. (1984, Summer). "Non-violent resistance. A strategy for the occupied territories." *Journal of Palestine Studies*. 13 (4) 22-36.

[16] I would hypothesize that martyrdom programs comprise a minority share of all Palestinian television programming as measured by my analysis of and understanding of television shows listed in *Media* - the guide to television programs available in the Palestinian Authority. However, such a claim of course needs to be empirically validated by a formal content analysis of the contents of all Palestinian television programs.

[17] See as an example a quote from Israel-based Palestinian Media Watch Director Itamar Marcus, "The children - through this loveable image are receiving poisonous messages and they don't even realize they're being poisoned," in a news piece by Roth. Roth, R. (2007, May 11). "Militant Mickey Mouse." London: *CBS News Video*. http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=2793570n

See also a quote from Palestinian Minister of Information Mustafa Barghouti, "I demanded that Hamas suspend the program and they have withdrawn it, because it was wrong to use a program directed at children to convey political messages" in a piece by al-Mughrabi. Al-Mughrabi, N. (2007, May 10, 9: 46AM). "Palestinians shelf Islamic 'Mickey Mouse' TV show." *New Zealand Herald*.

Implicit in both these statements - coming from very different points along the political spectrum - was the assumption that these programs have a harmful direct effect (or were already having a direct effect) on Palestinian children.

[18] In this vein, the critics' response is in keeping with popular, and in part, scholarly assumptions that claim there exists a one to one relationship between contents, on the one hand, and their reception or effects, on the other – irrespective of what contents are being debated.

[19] See, for example, Hodge, R. & Tripp, D. (1986). "Children and television: A semiotic approach." Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Davies, M. M. (1997). *Fake, Fact and Fantasy: Children's Interpretations of Television Reality*. Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Palmer, P. (1986). *The lively audience*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Warshel, Y. (2007). "As Though There is Peace." : Opinions of Jewish-Israeli Children About Watching Rechov Sumsum/Shara'a Simsim Amidst Armed Political Conflict. In Lemish, D. and Gotz, M. (Eds.) *Children and Media at Times of Conflict and War*, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

[20] McGuire, W. (1986) "The Myth of Massive Media Impact: Savagings and Salvagings*." Public Communication and Behavior.* Vol. 1, 173-257.

[21] The mini-series *Palestinian Tragedy* chronicles Palestinian history as told from the mainstream hegemonic nationalistic narrative.

[22] Rideout, D. and Foehr, U. (2003) *Kids and Media in America* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Dorr, A., Kovaric, P. and Doubleday, C. (1989) "Age and content influences on children's perceptions of the realism of television families," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 34: 377-397.

St. Peters, M., Fitch, M., Huston, A.C., Wright, J.C., & Eakins, D.J. (1991). "Television and families: What do young children watch with their parents." *Child Development,* 62, 1409-1423.