

# Social representations and reactions to traumatic experiences in the Gaza strip



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# Medicalization of suffering

- Scholars have voiced concerns regarding variations in the social representation of trauma, and the uncertain universality or cross-cultural validity of PTSD as a response to traumatic experiences.
- Cultural models may play a role in the mechanisms of psychopathology by modulating attention to the body, influencing causal attribution of sensations and symptoms, coping, help-seeking, adaptation, and the social response to distress.
- PTSD studies have examined the effects of single traumatic events . It is uncertain how to apply them to people exposed to repetitive, ongoing and multiple traumatic events.

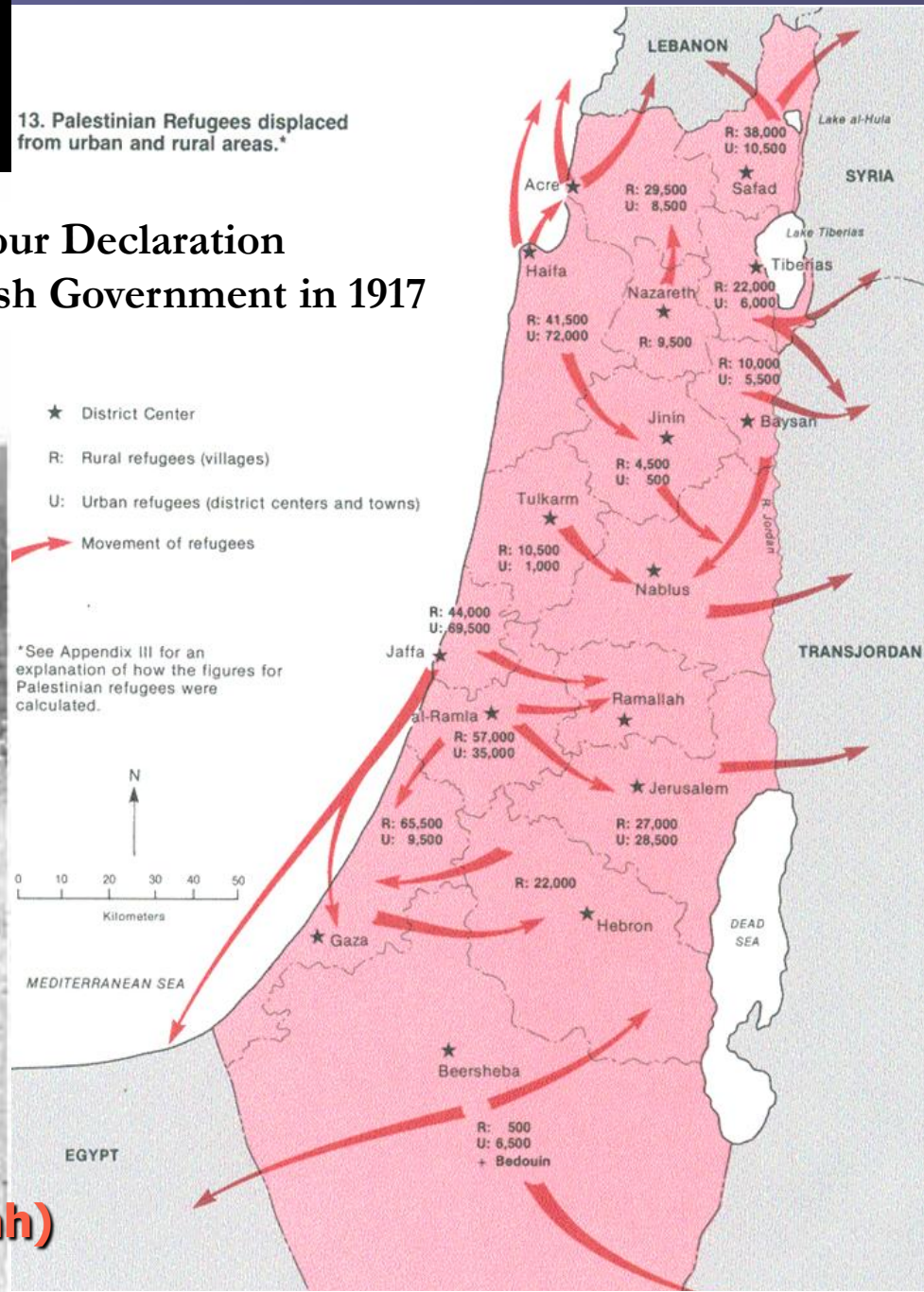
**In 1948, 531 Palestinian villages and towns were depopulated or demolished.**

**More than 914,221 Palestinians became refugees.**



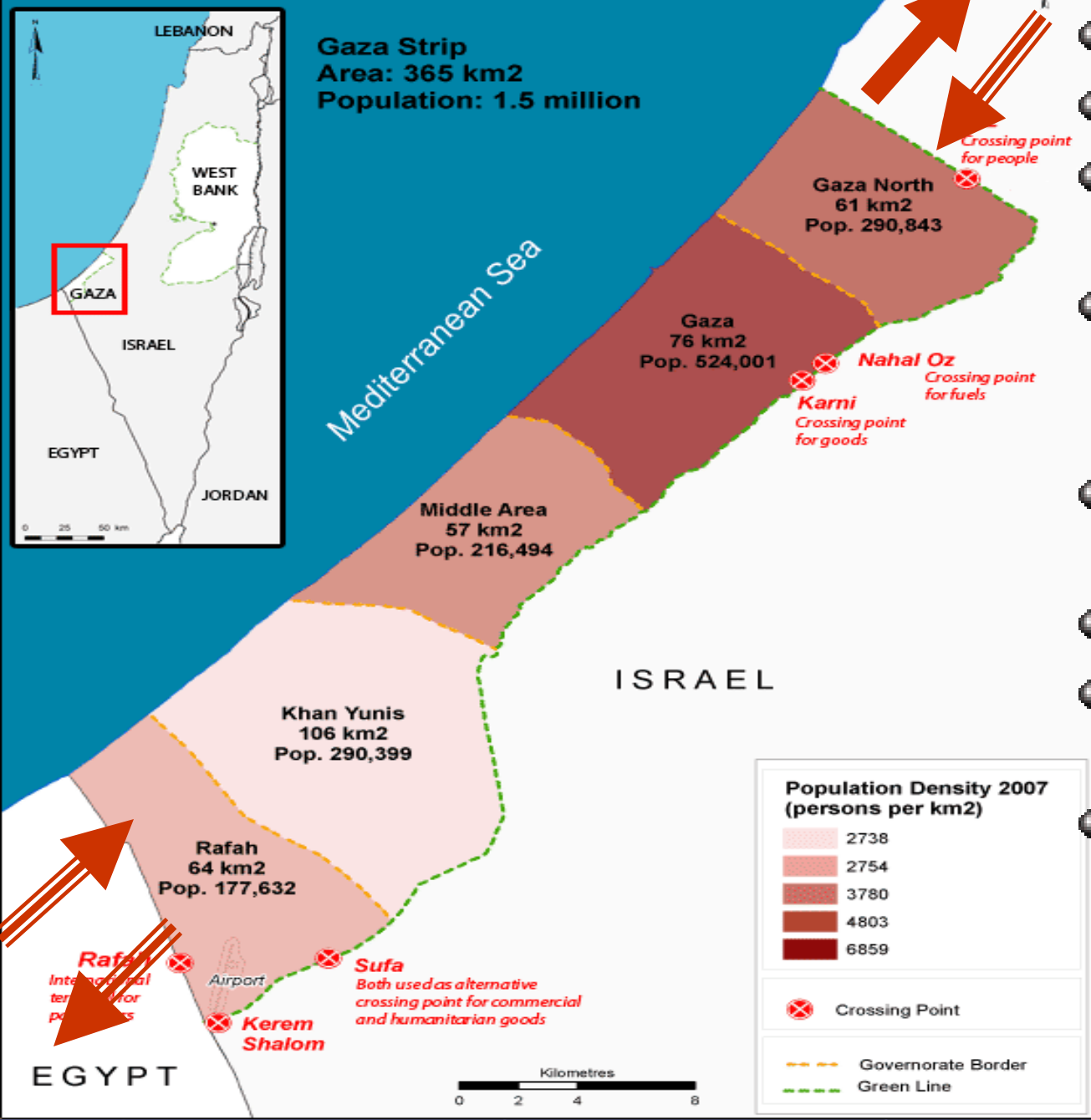
**First uprooting (Al Nakbah)**

**Balfour Declaration  
British Government in 1917**



# Historical context

- 1948: Al Nakba
- 1967: the second displacement (325,000) to the Gaza Strip and West Bank
- 1987: the first Intifada erupted
- 1993: the Oslo agreement (stalemate in the peace)
- 2000: the Second Intifada
- 2006: the first democratic elections
- 2006: Gaza is an enemy area
- 2008: “Operation Cast Lead”



365 km

1.5 millions

8 refugee camps

Two main entrances, always closed

One of the biggest prisons in the world  
(UN special rapporteur)

Electricity and fuel supplies are reduced

Humanitarian crisis

Over 80% below poverty line

More than 141 essential medications are not available

# Mental health outcomes of structural violence

- 21.5% of children in Gaza had anxiety disorders. Girls reported higher levels of anxiety than boys.
- Children are exposed to violence (i.e. torture of parents, etc.) and held in prison without trial (no juvenile courts).
- 63% of Palestinian women in Gaza were exposed to traumatic life experiences.
- PTSD among Palestinian children (age +5-16) = 58% of girls. 50% of boys score positive for PTSD symptoms.
- Prevalence of anxiety and depression symptoms among PHC patients was 75%.
- Competence to detect mental ill health among GPs is very low (12%).
- Disintegration of the social fabric and erosion of family values (e.g. (father in prison, tortured and humiliated, parents' living under siege, masculinity jeopardized).

## Indirect and long-term consequences of violence and siege

- Destruction of the infrastructure (health services, pharmaceuticals, etc.)
- House demolitions: 4,000 were destroyed, 17,000 were damaged (Dec 26, 2008- Jan 18, 2009)
- Water supply is contaminated and unsafe
- 98% of factories have been closed
- Devastation of agriculture and fisheries (e.g. fishermen)
- 90% of goods are smuggled through tunnels
- 89% of people live under the poverty line
- 90% of the population is dependent on international aid (UNRWA and Food Aid Program)
- **Gaza is among the top ten worse humanitarian and medical emergencies in the world today (Lancet, 2009; Pedersen, 2009)**











# The Painful Journey







# In protracted conflicts: What does trauma mean?



# Methodology

- This is a qualitative exploratory study employing ethnographic interviews with key informants
- Recruitment of key informants was done with purposive sampling among Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip
- Informants were selected because they were educated and articulate, were recognized by others as having knowledge of the local social and cultural context, and were willing to reflect on the issue of traumatic experiences and traumatic memory in the Palestinian context



# *Sadma* (“blow”)

- “...what makes *sadma* to me is the Israeli shelling... *sadma* occurs when I am psychologically persecuted, when I see a big event, when I lose a beloved person.” (Int. 1)
- “... expressing [mental] suffering in terms of *sadma* is a very minimum [expression] and misrepresents our sufferings... because of [the non-accidental] repetitive exposure to these events, people would not perceive it as *sadma*... I do not expect this to be *sadma*, [since the ongoing violence] is much bigger than that...*sadma* is a transient, temporary experience”. (Int. 8)

## *Faji'ah* (“tragedy”)

- “ I was walking with my husband to my father’s house and suddenly a car stopped not far from the house. People gathered in front of the main door, then people told me that my bother was killed by the army. I ran to the house. I found the stairs full of blood. I remember myself crying and screaming then lost consciousness... It was *faji'ah* for me.” (Int. 5)

# *Musiba* (“calamity”)

- “*Musiba* is *ebtela* (ordeal) and a test from Allah (God) who gives us the support. My house was demolished like many hundreds of people. [pause] It is true that many people lost their houses but in the end it is me and my family who have to deal with this *musiba*. [pause] *Alhamdulillah* (Thank God) it is all well.” (Int. 6)
- “...the effects or results of *musiba* don’t disappear; they leave permanent and durable scars. The effect of *musiba* will be continuous and long lasting...” (Int. 8)

# Local Idioms of Distress

## ● *Assabiah*

- “it feels like electricity in my arms and legs; I become easily provoked for minor reasons” (Int. 7)
- I become nervous and displace my anger on my wife and children. [pause] I cannot tolerate it, I behaved differently.” (Int. 8).

## ● ***Araq.. Nafsi***

- “ the person could not sleep at night because of fear or thinking of what is going to happen next” (Int. 1)
- “*Araq* is accompanied with physical symptoms such as headache and low appetite”

## ● ***Azma nafsiah***

- “The person may deal with one [psychological crisis], but these crises accumulate internally and suddenly come back and erupt in a devastating manner” (Int. 3)
- “The person passes through *azamat* (psychological crises); then these *azamat* accumulate and appear in the form of mental health problems” (Int. 6 )

## ● *Dagt nafsi*

- “I have no energy to deal with these problems; they are many and beyond my abilities. I keep repressing and hiding them, but one day I will burst” (Int. 7)
- “Because of these events [referring to unemployment, electricity cuts, etc.] the person becomes unable to bear the situation, and unable to stand it.” (Int. 1)

## ● *Qalaq*

- “Seeing all these things around me—my friend was wounded and my neighbor was killed—I keep thinking ‘who is next?’ and ‘when is my turn going to come?’ I feel sad, scattered and find difficulty going to bed.” (Int. 5)
- “I always feel confused and helpless and find myself unstable, thinking of what is going to happen” (Int. 8)

## ● *Khaufa:*

- “My son was sleeping in the night and we suddenly heard a noise. It was an army tank passing near our house. My son awoke in panic and was scared. [After that] he had fever, stayed in bed and didn’t like to eat. We took him to a *shiekha* (old woman, traditional healer) to massage him. Then he was fine.”  
(Int. 1)

# Limitations & Recommendations

- Sample was small and may not be representative of the range of experiences in the community. Participants had a relatively high level of awareness of mental health issues and terminology and this may have influenced their responses.
- More detailed ethnographic studies are needed to identify the association between these local idioms and mental health conditions, particularly anxiety and depression.
- Further studies are needed in order to distinguish those social stressors that give rise to new social representations of trauma. Quantitative methods are needed.

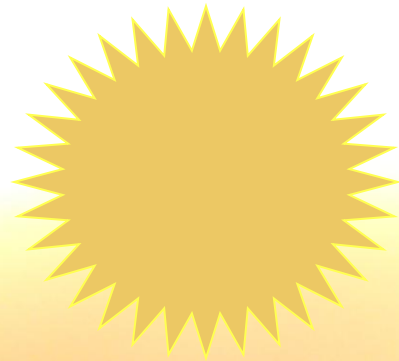


# Conclusion

- The idioms we have described borrow from everyday language to make sense of the impact of violence in a situation of protracted conflict.
- The idioms show the overuse of biomedical language and terminology of suffering over local expressions.
- These cultural idioms of trauma are not diagnostic entities that require treatment but a vocabulary through which distress is expressed and social support mobilized. However, they may influence the course and outcome of other clinical syndromes or disorders.

## Phase 1 (completed)

- Investigating the social representations of trauma and ways in which trauma is defined (i.e., meanings assigned to trauma) and acted upon (i.e., reactions or responses).
- Examining cultural variations of local idioms of distress
  - Sadma
  - Fajia
  - Musiba
  - List of main idioms of distress
  - List of main traumatic events
- Examining local systems for coping, social support and social cohesion...
  - First domain: Creating cultural and religious meaning
  - Second domain: Moving from individualism to collectivism
  - Third domain: Normalization and habituation
  - Forth domain: Acceptance, expectant and readiness



**Thank you**