In their homes, in the street, in UN-run schools, Palestinian youth are not safe from Israeli bullets

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Raghad Allassar's classmates did not hear the Israeli bullet that tore into the nine-year-old's brain as she wrote an English test. But as a pool of blood spread across her desk and spilled on to the floor, a wall of screams rose from the classroom of the UN elementary school for girls in Khan Yunis. At that point Raghad was still crying for help. By the time she was hauled into the trauma room of a neighbouring hospital she was silent. For five crucial days the army blocked Raghad's transfer to an Israeli hospital with the facilities to offer a glimmer of hope. An infection set in. On Tuesday doctors told her father, Adnad, that she was brain dead. "The bullet entered under her eye and went out the back of her head," Mr Allassar said. "It took them a long time to stop the bleeding, and her heart stopped and they gave her shocks. From that moment she was like a dead body, although she wasn't dead." He thought he would come back after the funeral and kept asking why Munir has come when we've had 'the party' for him. His four-year-old sister asks point Raghda was still crying for help. By the time she was hauled into the trauma room of a neighbouring hospital she was silent.

"The children see many people killed, so they come to expect to be killed. This is horrible, that children should accept the bullet wound in the chest and another in the groin. In four years of intifada, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights says, the army has killed 136 children in Rafah and Khan Yunis, a quarter of all the Palestinian children who have died during the uprising, because of its "indiscriminate shooting, excessive force, a shoot-to-kill policy and the deliberate targeting of children". The dead in Khan Yunis and Rafah in recent weeks also include two 12-year-old boys, a 15-year-old girl and a 75-year-old man who was hit by a sniper. "It's state terror against the whole population." In recent weeks the Israelis have again been preoccupied with terrorism, from the murder of 16 people in the Beersheba bus bombings to the slaughter of Russian schoolchildren in Beslan, which received blanket coverage. But what the Jews suffer is nothing to the terror we live with from them. "It takes such a toll on our health, on society, most of all on the children." Israelis live in fear of random attacks, principally the suicide bombing of buses and cafes, and shootings in the occupied territories. But they are generally safe in their homes and are more likely to be killed in a road accident than by a bomb. In southern Gaza and parts of the West Bank there is often no sanctuary from the seemingly relentless, indiscriminate Israeli shooting. Israel classifies Gaza Strip towns such as Rafah and Khan Yunis, and Nablus and Jenin in the West Bank, as war zones. That, the army says, justifies the firing of powerful sophisticated weapons into residential areas or the bulldozing of scores of homes each month, ostensibly in search of rarely discovered tunnels for smuggling in weapons. Barely a night passes in Rafah or Khan Yunis without the machine-gun fire that has shredded hundreds of homes, forcing families to sleep in a single inner room behind bricked up windows or a second wall. Others live in the rubble of their bulldozed houses, perpetually in the firing line from the rarely seen soldiers high in the gun towers. A fortnight ago 15-year-old Mazen Al-Ara was trying to lead his siblings away from tanks and heavy shooting around their house on the edge of the "Philadelphi Road", the highly militarised border at Rafah. The army had partially destroyed the family home months before, but the Aras went on living there because they had no money to move. Usually they sheltered in an inner room when the shooting began, but that night it was so intense that Mazen said they would all be killed if they stayed. As he led the terrified group into the street, Mazen was caught by a burst of fire. The boy died; doctors took 19 bullets from his body. A few days earlier 10-year-old Munir Al-Daqas left his home in Jabalya refugee camp to visit his grandparents' house five minutes' walk away. Israeli tanks were on the far side of the camp, but no one saw any danger in the heart of Jabalya, around its bustling market, in daylight. "It must have been a sniper," his mother, Kifah, said. "People told me as I was shopping in the market. I couldn't believe it. Munir was just there with me and now they were saying he was dead." Mrs Daqas unfolded a picture of the semi-naked body of her son in his grave. There is a bullet wound in the chest and another in the groin. "I am still shocked by the murder of Raghda Allassar, but it frequently says that child victims are caught in crossfire among Palestinian attacks on the army or Jewish settlers. There were no such battles when Raghad Allassar and Munir Daqas were hit. Or when a bullet pierced the blind of Sara Zorob's living room and struck the 10-year-old in the chest, killing her instantly. Commanders in Gaza have admitted in the past that when their soldiers are attacked they are allowed to fire back randomly, risking civilian lives. There are other young victims, as well. The children who are physically injured are not the only ones harmed," said Usama Freona, a psychologist at the UN clinic in Rafah. "The levels of violence children are exposed to is horrific." We work in a lot of schools to treat the children. In the one next to Kfar Darom [a Jewish settlement in Gaza], all the children are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Most of them were crying and shaking when they were speaking about their experiences. There is a lot of killing." Mohammed Abu Yusuf is the counsellor at Raghad Allassar's school. "After Raghad was shot," he said, "the children were crying and screaming. Five girls in her class still won't come back to school. We took Raghad's desk away and brought another but none of the students will sit at it." Raghad Allassar is not the first child shot at the cluster of UN schools in Khan Yunis. Last year an Israeli bullet blinded Huda Darwish, 12, as she sat at her desk. Mrs Daqas said her other children could not comprehend Munir's death. "Munir's younger brother doesn't understand he is dead. He thought he would come back after the funeral and kept asking why Munir has come when we've had 'the party' for him. His four-year-old sister asks every day if we can search the market because Munir must not be lost," she said. Mr Freona said the constant violence begets violence. "Look at the games children play. Most of the boys play Arabs and Jews. Many want to play the role of the Jews. They see that the Israeli soldiers are the ones with the guns and they are strong and they see that is the most important thing," he said. "They see guns as the source of power, the solution to dealing with any problem, the way to get what they want." With that comes a collapse in respect for authority. The image of Mohammed al-Dura, the 12-year-old Gaza boy shot as his father vainly tried to protect him from Israeli gunfire in the first days of the latest intifada, is seared on the Palestinian consciousness. It has come to symbolise what they see as the callous indifference of Israeli forces to the lives of their children. But Mrs Abu Shawarib said it had a further impact on many children, who saw that a father was unable to protect his son. "The respect for authority is shattered because children see their fathers beaten in front of them," she said. "The authority of the father, who used to just have to utter one word for the child to obey, is shattered. The father looks helpless to protect the child and the child thinks they are alone." Another result of the perpetual killing was that many children came to expect an early death and to welcome the prospect of becoming a "martyr." "The martyr is in paradise, he has glory here and in the afterlife where it is so much better than life in Rafah," she said. "The children see many people killed, so they come to expect to be killed. This is horrible, that children should accept the possibility of death."