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'Handcuffed Parenthood': Parents of Young At-Risk Children Who Were Removed From Their Homes in East Jerusalem

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ABSTRACT

Parents of children who were removed from home are generally under-researched, and there is a shortage of knowledge concerning their perceptions and experiences, particularly in complex contexts. Using a context-informed perspective and intersectionality theory, this study aims to better understand the experiences of parents regarding their children's removal from home due to maltreatment, as well as their coping strategies, particularly against the complex socio-political background of East Jerusalem. Twenty-two in-depth interviews were conducted with primary caregivers of young children who had been removed from their homes by an Israeli court order due to incidents of verified child maltreatment, using an inductive, context-sensitive design inspired by grounded theory principles to guide the research process. The analysis revealed that Palestinian parents in East Jerusalem perceive their children's removal as a profound disruption to their parental role, intensified by legal, political and geographic hurdles. The findings give voice to their difficulties in maintaining contact with their removed children, describe the tensions between conflicting legal statuses and residency rights and outline coping methods ranging from acceptance to viewing the situation as a temporary separation. To meet the needs of families from East Jerusalem whose children were removed from their home by a court order because of abuse and/or neglect, policies and practices should acknowledge the impact of the political conflict in shaping the life experiences of these families, and interventions must account for the intersection of socio-political barriers, legal status complexities and the unique vulnerabilities faced by parents in East Jerusalem.

1 | Introduction

In many cultures worldwide, children who are removed from home by court order due to maltreatment often belong to families from underprivileged segments of society (Schofield et al. 2011). These families frequently encounter various stressors, including poverty, marginalization, family issues and housing instability (Slettebø 2013). The current study explores the experiences of such families living under specific circumstances of East Jerusalem Palestinians in Israel. To explore this population, the study combines a context-informed approach (Nadan and Roer-Strier 2020), which attempts to explain the multiple contexts of social phenomena, and intersectionality, which highlights the intersection and interaction between different types of oppression (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Collins 2019; Krumer-Nevo and Komem 2015). Using these two theoretical perspectives, the study investigates the experiences of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem, who are characterized by struggling with political complexity, unemployment, fractured families, oppression, domestic violence and spatial militarization (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015). It aims to shed light on the challenges encountered by families whose children were removed from homes by an Israeli court order after verified incidents of child maltreatment and the strategies employed by

these parents to navigate their parenthood. These parents face the rejection of the right to care for their children, the loss of contact with them and the loss of control and responsibility for raising their children (Schofield et al. 2011). Thus, central to this investigation is the attempt to understand how parents maintain relationships with their children postremoval while managing social expectations and parental roles.

1.1 | The Unique Context of East Jerusalem

Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and is held sacred by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. The city is divided between East, which is mostly Arab, and West, which is Jewish. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2023), at the end of 2022, the city's population numbered 962 612 (of which 61% were Jewish and 39% Arab residents). Jerusalem is considered the most diverse and culturally complex city in Israel (Korah and Choshen 2021). In 1967, the territory of the West Bank was occupied by Israel, and the territory of East Jerusalem was annexed shortly after. This act of annexation divided the Palestinians into two groups: 'Permanent residents' (with an Israeli blue ID card) and 'others' (with a Jordanian/Palestinian green ID card). Although not full citizens, East Jerusalem Palestinians generally hold a blue ID card and thus are entitled to free movement in Israel as well as to some other civil and social rights (Hamayel et al. 2017). For example, they can vote in municipal elections but not for the parliament; they travel abroad with a Laissez-Passer and not with an Israeli passport; and they are entitled to governmental welfare services and are subject to the Israeli juridical system (Ramon 2021). One key problem that arises from this specific residency status is the constant threat of losing it (Tamimi 2017). To avoid the revocation of their residency status, Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem must pass *the centre of life test*. This means that they continuously must submit evidence to the Ministry of Interior Affairs showing that they live and work in Jerusalem (BADIL 2014). Many Palestinian residents take extreme measures to keep their blue ID card, such as living in inappropriate conditions in refugee camps around Jerusalem (Larkin 2014; Tamimi 2017), which may affect their families and lead to severe neglect of children.

Keeping the residency status is even more complicated in 'mixed families', where one of the partners is a resident of East Jerusalem and the other is a resident of the Palestinian Authority. Since 1991, spouses without an Israeli civilian status (i.e., residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) are required to obtain entry permits to Israel to live with their families (Tamimi 2017). Children born to 'mixed' couples must also pass the *centre of life* test and provide evidence of where and with which parent they live. If the child's centre of life is in East Jerusalem, s/he will be registered in the population registry in Israel. Failing the *centre of life* test means that the child is a resident of the Palestinian Authority and thus cannot enrol in educational institutions or receive medical care in Israel (Hamayel et al. 2017). As a result, mixed couples face multiple social, economic and often familial challenges, which burden and deeply affect the families in East Jerusalem (Ramon 2018).

Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Collins 2019) provides a conceptual framework for understanding how overlapping systems of oppression, such as gender, legal status, ethnicity and political marginalization, interact to shape people's lived experiences. This theory highlights the importance of examining not only each axis of identity separately but also how multiple forms of disadvantage intersect and compound one another. In the case of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem, intersectionality offers a lens for analysing how legal, political and gendered structures jointly influence their parental roles, access to services and ability to advocate for their children.

Building on these foundations, the context-informed approach (Nadan and Roer-Strier 2020) applies an intersectional perspective to the fields of social work and child protection. This approach emphasizes that the difficulties of living in a politically complex area like East Jerusalem, along with the ongoing threat of losing residency status, affect how parents cope with the loss of their parental rights and the removal of their children from home by the Israeli court. The context-informed approach allows for a deeper understanding of how families interpret their circumstances and how various contexts of politics, law and culture intersect in their everyday lives.

Additionally, Palestinian mothers in East Jerusalem face challenges not only due to their legal and political status but also due to patriarchal and traditional family structures. As women are often subordinate to men in both familial and legal terms (Hattab 2012), their civil status is frequently dependent on that of their husbands. The traditional gender roles intersect here with formal legal processes, creating compounded barriers that limit women's ability to act, appeal or maintain custody, even when they are the primary caregivers.

1.2 | Parenting in a Complex Political Context

Studies found that political conflict increases parental stress (Miller and Rasmussen 2010). Parents in conflict zones experience the demands of everyday parenting as highly stressful, particularly when parents need to constantly focus on maintaining their safety and the safety of their children (Conway et al. 2013), which depletes their mental resources to care for their children's emotional needs (Samuelson et al. 2016). To protect their children, parents may be overly protective and overly restrictive of their children's behaviours (Sriskandarajah et al. 2015). In addition, stress caused by exposure to war events may negatively affect the emotional health of parents, leading to more conflicts, increased hostility and reduced warmth in parent–child interactions (Conger et al. 2002).

1.3 | Out-Of-Home Care

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), parents are responsible for raising and caring for their children, and the state is obligated to support parents in this task (Convention on the Rights of the Child 2013). Sometimes, however, parents may become incapable of this task (De Wilde and Vanobbergen 2020), which requires the state to intervene (Said Salem and De Wilde 2022). When a court decides that a maltreated child should be removed from the parents

to out-of-home care, professional workers are required to find the best solution that meets the child's mental and behavioural needs (Colton and Hellinckx 1994; Leloux-Opmeer et al. 2017). The Israeli welfare system provides various forms of out-of-home care (Ministry of Welfare and Social Security 2019) with a declared policy advocating for family foster care (De Wilde et al. 2019). The basis for this policy is the belief that children should grow up in a stable and safe environment that is as similar to a family as possible (De Wilde et al. 2019). Yet, because of practical and historical circumstances (cf. Zeira and Grupper 2023), most children are placed in residential care settings, with only about 25% of the children placed with foster families (State Comptroller 2023). Although there are sincere efforts to place young children with foster families, many will end up in various types of residential programmes (e.g., small group homes).

1.4 | Parents of Children in Out-Of-Home Care

In many countries around the world, court decisions about child removal often relate to families from underprivileged populations, who face multiple stressors, including poverty, marginalization and housing instability (Slettebø 2013). Child removal is often perceived by parents as a threat to their parental identity, accompanied by frustration and anger (Schofield et al. 2011). Being a parent is a socially constructed identity that is closely related to moral and social judgements, and parents are expected to prioritize their children above everything else (Said Salem and De Wilde 2022). Failing to do so (e.g., by abuse or neglect) renders social criticism and a sense of failed parenthood (Schofield et al. 2011). As parents are perceived as responsible for the removal of their child, their pains and sorrows as parents are often delegitimized by society (Broadhurst and Mason 2017) and the consequences for the parents are detrimental. Parents face the rejection of the right to care for their children, the loss of contact with their children and the loss of control and responsibility for raising their children (Schofield et al. 2011). Although ideally, the welfare system should address the difficulties that brought about child removal and strive for their reunification with their parents, too often this duty is not fulfilled, which may lead to parental feelings of estrangement and anger towards the welfare system. These feelings are further intensified in cases of national minorities, like the Palestinian Arabs living in East Jerusalem, who mistrust the welfare system that took their child away, and may be reluctant to cooperate with any treatment (Yaniv 2023).

1.5 | Research Goals

In light of these theoretical insights, we examined the various contexts in which Palestinian families in East Jerusalem, whose children were removed from home by a court order due to abuse and neglect, navigate their daily lives. We emphasized the challenges arising from the unique geopolitical, social and cultural circumstances context. These families face multiple difficulties that significantly affect their parenting practices. Consequently, this study aims (1) to explore the challenges faced by parents in their efforts to maintain relationships with their children after the removal from home and (2) to describe the strategies these parents suggest for overcoming these challenges.

2 | Methods

2.1 | The Study Design

We used a qualitative approach based on the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This approach focuses on the participants' experiences to understand their perceptions, the meaning they attribute to their life experiences and their interpretation of specific events (Patton 1990). Given the characteristics of the study's participants, we applied Greenfield's (1992) research paradigm, emphasizing sociocultural perceptions among minority groups. This perspective guided our inquiry into how participants interpret and cope with their children's removal within their sociocultural and political context.

2.2 | Participants

Participants were 22 caregivers from East Jerusalem whose children were removed from their homes by a court order when they were 0–6 years old, due to neglect and/or abuse. Some of the children were still in out-of-home care at the time of the interviews, whereas others had already returned to their parents' homes. The sample included family members who were the children's primary caregivers (parents, grandparents or aunts) before the removal from home and who continued to be in contact with them after the transition to out-of-home care. Overall, we interviewed 13 mothers, eight fathers and one aunt. Their ages ranged from 24 to 68, with an average of 38.27 (SD = 11.31). Table 1 presents the participants' socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age and family status during the removal) and removal information (e.g., the main reason for the removal).

The selection of participants was based on a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. To recruit participants, one of the researchers first approached social workers at the Department of Social Services (DSS) and other professionals in East Jerusalem and asked for their help. After families had given initial consent, the researcher called and explained the research goal. Parents who agreed to participate were invited to be interviewed, and some helped to recruit more families until 'theoretical saturation' was achieved (Hill et al. 1997; Lincoln and Guba 1985). The interviews were conducted at the time and place chosen by the participants. Most of them (15 participants) preferred to be interviewed in neutral places (e.g., a coffee shop). Five asked for a video call meeting, and two preferred to be interviewed in their homes.

2.3 | Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, which included a brief socio-demographic questionnaire, background questions and questions about their experiences, their familial relations, encounters with official institutions and their coping

TABLE 1 | Participants' socio-demographic characteristics and removal information (reasons for removal as reported by the case managers–social workers).

Name	Member of the family	Age	Family status during removal	Number of children removed from home	Time since removal (years)	Child still in care	Main reasons for the removal
Yazeed	Father	35	Married	6	1	Yes	Parenting problems. Father's severe physical abuse of the child. Severe neglect of the child.
Hadeel	Mother	28	Married	6	1	Yes	Parenting problems. Father's severe physical abuse of the child. Severe neglect of the child.
Hadey	Father	24	Separated	2	4	Yes	Parenting problems. Severe neglect. Extreme parenting conflicts after separation.
Tamer	Father	64	Married	5	12	No	Mother's mental illness. Parenting problems Severe neglect of the child.
Nour	Auntie	44	Married	1	5	Yes	Parental alienation. Father's severe physical abuse of the child.
Alyia	Mother	30	Separated	2	6	Yes	Extreme parenting conflicts after separation. Father's severe physical abuse of the child.
Mira	Mother	47	Separated	5	8	No	Father's severe physical abuse of the child.
Sabrine	Mother	46	Married	7	9	Yes	Parenting problems. Severe neglect of the child.
Shadyia	Mother	28	Married	3	5	Yes	Parenting problems. Severe neglect. Father's severe physical abuse of the child.
Marwan	Father	68	Married	5	7	Yes	Parenting problems. Severe neglect.
Ameen	Father	38	Separated	3	1	Yes	Parenting problems. Father's severe emotional problems. Severe neglect of the child.
Majeda	Mother	28	Divorced	1	1	Yes	Parental alienation. Father's severe physical and sexual abuse of the child. Severe neglect of the child.
Malak	Mother	29	Divorced	3	1	Yes	Highly conflict parenting after divorce. Father's substance abuse. Father's severe physical abuse of the child.
Khaled	Father	42	Divorced	3	14	Yes	Parenting problems. Severe neglect of the child.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Name	Member of the family	Age	Family status during removal	Number of children removed from home	Time since removal (years)	Child still in care	Main reasons for the removal
Aseel	Mother	36	Divorced	2	10	No	Highly conflict parenting after divorce. Father's severe physical abuse of the child.
Reem	Mother	50	Married	4	10	Yes	Parenting problems. Severe neglect of the child.
Raneen	Mother	32	Married	5	6	Yes	Parenting problems. Severe neglect of the child.
Nabeel	Father	37	Married	2	7	Yes	Difficulty functioning simultaneously as a father and breadwinner.
Abeer	Mother	40	Married	10	10	Yes	Parenting problems. Severe neglect of the child. Father's severe physical abuse of the child.
Rawan	Mother	37	Widow	5	5	Yes	Difficulty functioning simultaneously as a mother and breadwinner. Severe neglect.
Samar	Mother	28	Separated	2	0.5	Yes	Highly conflict parenting after separate. Father's severe physical abuse of the child.
Karam	Father	36	Married	5	0.5	Yes	Mother's mental illness. Difficulty functioning simultaneously as a father and breadwinner. Father's severe physical abuse of the child.

mechanisms. The interviews began with an open inviting question, such as 'Tell me a little about yourself and your life', to create a comfortable atmosphere and guide the participants to share their experiences freely and without restrictions. This question was followed by others, for example, How do you think your child copes with the challenges s/he faces in everyday life? What helps your child cope with the challenges experienced outside the home? What community service did you need to help you keep the child at home? How did the removal affect your personal life? In the spirit of the qualitative paradigm, we came up with an open and dynamic approach to the interviews (Shkedi 2007) and added questions based on the information we got during the interview (i.e., probing questions; Qu and Dumay 2011).

The interviews were conducted in Arabic in a safe environment chosen by the participants and lasted 50–120 min. All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and translated into Hebrew. Selected citations were translated to English, and some were re-translated to Arabic for accuracy.

2.4 | Data Analysis

Data analysis combined inductive principles from grounded theory with a structured thematic approach, enabling us to generate data-driven themes grounded in participants' narratives. Although grounded theory guided the study's sampling, open coding and constant comparison, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2020) provided a clear analytic framework to organize recurring patterns and develop overarching themes. This integration allowed us to remain close to participants' lived experiences while ensuring analytic transparency and coherence.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic classification in three stages. First, the transcripts were read carefully several times to ensure in-depth familiarity with their contents (Moustakas 1994). Second, various transcript sections were differentiated and classified into units of meaning compatible with the research interests (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Using 'open coding', we first read the transcripts line by line,

checking the text and identifying key ideas that emerged. We then wrote notes in the margins in order to mark major statements. For example, whenever parents discussed the influence of the complex political context, the researchers documented similar codes. Several initial codes stemmed from the words that parents used. For instance, when 'Shadyia', described her sense of helplessness in the face of the court's decision to remove her children, we coded this as 'helplessness' to capture the emotional response she attributed to the situation. Her quote: 'What could I do? I did everything to take them, but nothing worked' exemplifies the sense of being overwhelmed and without agency. This code was applied to other participants who conveyed similar sentiments about their lack of control over the circumstances.

Finally, similar statements were grouped together to extract themes that constituted the findings' conceptual skeleton (Creswell 2007). Throughout this process, Greenfield's (1992) approach provided a framework for interpreting the meanings attributed by participants to their experiences. Moreover, this paradigm helped us analyse how these parents' challenges, dilemmas and coping strategies were influenced by their cultural, social and political contexts. To ensure consistency and reliability in the analysis, the first author conducted the initial coding of the data. The second author, who is an experienced researcher and the study supervisor, reviewed the coding and provided feedback, and together, they refined the categorization of themes. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed until a consensus was reached. This collaborative process ensured that the analysis was both rigorous and reflective of multiple perspectives, reducing the potential for individual bias and enhancing the depth of interpretation.

2.5 | Authors' Positionality

In qualitative research, researchers act as a tool by carefully listening to participants and identifying patterns in their behaviour, which shape the study's findings (Shkedi 2007). Here, the Arab and Jewish researchers had backgrounds in social work that informed their work by drawing on their extensive expertise and familiarity with the research population. Thus, we were sensitive to the power dynamics during data collection and analyses, which helped ensure respect for the participants' voices while also maintaining a critical, reflexive stance. One of the authors is a Palestinian Arab woman born in Israel; she conducted all the interviews in Arabic to ensure participants could express themselves fully and comfortably in a familiar, safe environment of their choosing. During the interviews, she maintained cultural sensitivity and created an atmosphere as open and transparent as possible.

2.6 | Trustworthiness

We made great efforts to ensure that the research results will be 'worthy of attention' (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and provide a reliable picture of the experiences and perspectives of the participants. To ensure the trustworthiness, (a) a reflective diary was kept by the interviewing researcher in order to maintain the balance between the theoretical aspect of the study and the discourse of the participants and the phenomenon under study; (b) we used thick description, which includes every piece of contextual information gleaned in the course of gathering the information; and (c) quotes from the interviews were integrated to demonstrate our findings and to accurately reflect participants' perspectives (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

2.7 | Ethical Considerations

Participants signed an informed consent form after being given options to refuse participation in the study, to stop the interview at any point and not to respond to specific questions. Additionally, participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential. Participants were also given the option of stopping the recording during the interview if they felt it restricted them from expressing themselves freely. Finally, all names and other identifying information were altered to maintain confidentiality. Video interviews were conducted using encrypted technology to prevent unauthorized access. All recordings were deleted after the transcription and translation process. The research and its procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee of the researchers' University.

3 | Findings

The analyses generated three main themes, focusing on the parents' sense of helplessness, their unique dilemmas arising from their unique geopolitical situation and their coping mechanisms.

3.1 | Handcuffed Parenthood: Struggling to Maintain Contact With the Children

The interviews reveal that participants grappled with what it means to be a parent when their children are removed by the state and when political, legal and geographic boundaries divide them. These dilemmas especially emerged among parents whose legal or civil status differed from that of their children. Parents expressed a complex reality shaped by institutional abandonment by both Israeli and Palestinian systems and a constant tension between their sense of parental responsibility and their inability to fulfil it. This theme captures how parents define themselves within fractured and contradictory structures, where parenting becomes a struggle not only for physical contact but for recognition, legitimacy and belonging.

Sabrine, 46 years old, is a mother of seven children who were all removed from home when her youngest child was 2 years old due to harsh neglect and parenting problems. She describes the challenging situation that results from the geopolitical context, as she is an Israeli East Jerusalem resident, whereas her children are considered PA residents:

> In 2012, I didn't know to whom I should turn to get help. I turned to the welfare office in Ramallah [under the Palestinian Authority] to help me rent a house, but they did not agree to take responsibility. They claimed that I was a resident of Jerusalem and

> should apply for welfare there. So, I turned to welfare in Jerusalem and asked them to help me rent a house where I could live together with my children and help me settle the issue of the children's identity cards [...] They said they could only help me, but they cannot help the children, because they have no status [in Israel] and live in Ramallah [...] and there is nothing to do with them.
>
> (Sabrine, 46)

Sabrine describes feeling helpless because of the challenges of not belonging to the same system as her children. She describes her attempt to get help for herself and her children to prevent their removal, which failed because the children were not registered as Israeli residents.

Malak, 29-year-old Palestinian, is a mother of three children who are considered Israeli residents. Her children were removed from home at the ages of 3, 4 and 7 after the older child came to school with signs of abuse perpetrated by their father. She describes her disappointment with the systems that are supposed to help her:

> I can't get anything from [Israeli] social security or general welfare like other women, because I don't have an ID card and I am subject to favors from my family [...] The children belong to the Israeli system because they are residents of Jerusalem [...] I find myself in a situation where I have no one to turn to [...] There is no supporting family [...] The Israeli court will never give me the children [...] And as far as the Palestinian court is concerned, the children are not related to them, so who do you really refer to? I am helpless. I don't know how to get my children back! How to be a good mother and how to get help.
>
> (Malak, 29)

Malak expresses her distress of not knowing what to do to help herself and her children. Her life circumstances together with the complex geopolitical situation leave her helpless, with no assisting mechanism that can help her become the mother she wants to be for her children.

Khaled, who lives in a refugee camp near Jerusalem, had his three daughters removed from home by a court order due to neglect and abuse when the youngest was just 2 months old. He shares his feelings about his fatherhood:

> It feels like handcuffs [...] There is nothing to do and no way to help the children [...] It feels so helpless that, on the one hand, I want my daughters, but I can't keep in touch with them [...] I live behind the checkpoint, even if I have entry and permanent residency it is too complex, especially because of the checkpoint and the complexity there. They can decide to close the checkpoint and allow whoever they want to enter and forbid others [...]. I don't think our rights as parents are explained to us either [...]. It feels as if the children were taken away and we were left alone to deal with the loss and the inability to come visit or receive assistance and help within Jerusalem.
>
> (Khaled, 42)

Khaled describes the deep impact of the complex *geopolitical* context, detailing how it severely restricts his ability to maintain contact with his daughters, visit them and participate in their care process even after their removal from home.

3.2 | Dilemmas Arising From the Removal by a Court Order

The removal of children from home is followed by different parental dilemmas. Parents' feelings of anger, frustration and helplessness are further amplified by the complexity of the relationships between parents from East Jerusalem and the Israeli welfare and law systems, which ultimately manage the parent–child relationship directly or indirectly and have long- and short-term effects. We identified two categories of such dilemmas.

3.2.1 | Parenting Under Occupation in the Shadow of an Israeli Identity Card

This category includes women who were separated or divorced from their husbands with no family and social support, who, in some cases, lack any civilian status in Israel while their children are considered East Jerusalem residents due to their father's status and centre of life. When it becomes safe for these women to reunite with their children, they need to choose between living with the children in the Palestinian Authority, thus having the children lose their Israeli ID, or leaving the children in care to maintain their legal status. Shadiya, a mother of three children who were removed from home at ages 2, 4 and 6 due to abuse and neglect, has no legal status in Israel, whereas her children are registered as East Jerusalem residents. She explains

> [...] They let me choose to raise my children close to me in the West Bank, thereby revoking their residency and all their resident rights. I don't want them to grow up the way I did and live the life I had. I chose to let them grow in Jerusalem.
>
> (Shadyia, 28)

Shadyia had to make an impossible choice about her children's future and decided to revoke her own parental rights in favour of her children's legal status. If she chose to take them with her to the West Bank, they would be with their mother but lose their chance for a better life with an Israeli residency.

In other cases, it seems the pressure to maintain the children's legal status caused parental stress, which, according to them, triggered the maltreatment that consequently led to the children's removal. Mira is 47 years old, a mother of five children who were removed from home by a court order due to abuse. Mira describes the mental and emotional stress caused by this

move, which increased the family's expenses, caused stress and led to maltreatment:

> It all started because I wanted to keep our IDs. I moved to Jerusalem; then he started being stressed, beating the children and me. Thus, they removed my children to out-of-home care [...] All I asked was to keep our IDs.
>
> (Mira, 47)

Mira's narrative suggests that in order to maintain the Israeli IDs, she had to move to East Jerusalem, which caused familial tensions that led to abusing the children. Thus, Mira was forced to make a choice. Eventually, she gave up her parental rights and left the children in the welfare system so that they could keep their legal status.

Tamer, a 64-year-old father of five children who were removed from home when the youngest was 2 years old because of neglect and poor parental functioning, explains the harsh familial situation after removal:

> The children had no place to visit during the holidays [...] I lived in the street, and their mother lived in the West Bank. The Jewish social worker, who did not understand the complexity of the situation, thought that they should not visit in an enemy country, as they might be harmed and maybe lose their residency, it's better for them to stay in the residential care.
>
> (Tamer, 64)

Tamer describes the obliviousness of the Jewish social workers to the problem of parents and children with different legal statuses and mixed marriages in East Jerusalem. According to Tamer, the professional decision was based on the misconception that it was better and safer for the children to remain in public care within the borders of Jerusalem rather than visit their mother in the West Bank.

3.2.2 | Losing Parental Rights to the State

Participants described a feeling of losing the child in favour of the Israeli state. Although the feeling of helplessness against the state's bureaucracy is expected among parents in similar situations, the particular situation of East Jerusalem further intensifies this sense of animosity, as the families are Palestinians 'battling' for their children against the Israeli state. Karam, 36 years old, lives in a refugee camp near Jerusalem and is a father of five children who were removed from home when the youngest was 1.5 years old due to neglect and poor parental functioning. He shared

> The matter here is different [...] I feel that they are not mine anymore [...] It's like feeling useless; you have no say and can no longer decide for your children. It is to transfer them to institutions that belong to Israel, far from our influence as parents [...] As Palestinians [...] The fight here is not only about the house but has also become about the children [...].
>
> (Karam, 36)

Other parents felt that the removal from home was a form of ideological re-education. Ameen, a father of three children who were removed from home because of harsh neglect and poor parental functioning when the youngest was 3 years old, shared 'I feel like they want to make the children Zionists [...] Jews [...] They take a child from a Muslim home in the East of the city and put him in a place that belongs to the State of Israel...!!'

3.3 | Parents' Coping Patterns With Children's Removal From Home

Parents described three coping patterns that they adopted to deal with the removal of their children from home:

3.3.1 | Not in My Hands: Maintaining an Initial Survival Position to Justify the Removal.

Some participants, mostly women, said they were completely helpless and had no control over the situation they found themselves in. They felt that they had no way to influence their situation and, thus, had no control over what would happen with the children and with them in the future. Shadyia described the situation:

> This is how God wanted it; I had no other option; it was not in my hands, complete helplessness. What could I do? I did everything to take them, but nothing worked [...] The children think I'm lying to them, but it's not in my hands.
>
> (Shadyia, 28)

Sabrine tried to explain to the children that she was doing everything she could to take them back. She made it clear to them that a power greater than her controlled the situation, expressing the helplessness she was experiencing.

> [...] I always tell them to be patient. I am doing everything to bring them home. But it's not me who decides. There is a court. There is a welfare system. I don't decide. I make an effort; I tell them I want them at my house, but it's really not in my hands.
>
> (Sabrine, 46)

3.3.2 | Making Sense of the Unbearable

Some of the participants agreed and supported the Israeli court's decision to remove the child and were even sympathetic to the dominant and robust system. These participants see the decision as positive and protective. Majeda, 28 years old, lived in the West Bank at the time of the interview. Her daughter was removed from home by a court order when she was 6 years old because of

harsh neglect and abuse. Majeda expressed agreement and support of the Israeli court's decision:

> Israel has a law. Here in the West Bank, there is no law. I'm sure they're protecting her. I know she's in a good place today. At least they don't let her father hurt her over and over again. She's safe there. And I want her to stay there.
>
> (Majeda, 28)

To avoid feelings of pain and conflict, some parents justified the court's decision to remove the child from home by explaining that the decision helped them maintain contact with their children. Malak describes

> I am like the one who sits between the air and the water [...] Either you fly or drown [...] I have no status in Israel [...] I have no rights [...] I cannot stay with my children [...] He [the father] forbade me to see my children, and then when the court removed the children from his home, suddenly I could see them. It is better for them to stay in the welfare system, where they will care for themselves. I'm sure it was the right decision for them.
>
> (Malak, 29)

3.3.3 | Perception of Loss as Temporary Rather Than Permanent

Parents showing this pattern present a strong position. Most of them were fathers and they perceived the loss and the removal as a temporary thing that would pass. Khaled explained

> What helps us to cope with this situation is only the hope [...] The hope that the girls and inside we deeply believe [...] that one day they will be back home [...] we will be together [...] it's not complicated [...] just a little more, and we'll be together forever.
>
> (Khaled, 42)

Other parents claimed that the removal was based on a misunderstanding of the professional decision-makers, which will result with the revocation of the decision. Then, the children would eventually return home. Yazeed is a 35-year-old father who lives in East Jerusalem. The court removed his six children from home when the youngest was 5 months old, due to abuse and neglect. During the interview, he used these words to describe the situation:

> I will fight until the last moment. The removal was not justified. They entered the house and stole the children. They lied to the judge. When the truth is revealed, they will return to our home. To their mom and dad. And I'm not far from it. Soon, I'm bringing them home.
>
> (Yazeed, 35)

4 | Discussion

Our findings illustrate how the geopolitical context of parents living in East Jerusalem, whose children were removed from home by an Israeli court, shapes their perceptions about their parenting, caregiving practices and relationship with their children. This raises questions about the possibility of being a beneficial parent for children at risk in a complex and restrictive geopolitical reality, with structural inequality, lack of services and domestic violence (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015).

The feelings that parents describe reflect their 'handcuffed' reality, repeatedly mentioning that it is 'not in my hands'. They describe a reality of helplessness which, even before the children's removal, limited them as parents and made it difficult for them to be part of the social system and use services that would help their families. Our analysis suggests that the current social construction (Onuf 2013; Katzenstein 1996) limits these parents' ability to care for their children according to social expectations.

Parents, and specifically mothers, who were victims of abuse concurrently with their children described feeling helpless. On the one hand, their children were maltreated at home and required care; on the other hand, the mothers were unable to maintain contact with the children and be there for them as a good parent should be. This sense of helplessness is further intensified among parents without legal status in Israel, as well as those who have legal status but lack support from their community or family. Thus, the likelihood of new injustices is increased for parents and, consequently, for the family unit, including the children that the law aims to protect.

4.1 | Intersectionality and Its Familial Implications

In line with the intersectionality perspective (Collins 2019; Crenshaw 1989; Crenshaw 1991; Krumer-Nevo and Komem 2015), children and their families living in East Jerusalem belong to a doubly vulnerable minority. They have no or partial legal status in Israel, but they have also experienced removal to public care by the Israeli court due to maltreatment. Subsequently, parents' relationship with their children was severed mainly due to the complex geopolitical context of life in East Jerusalem. The findings show that the parents perceive the welfare system as unable to help them maintain relationships with their children and improve their parental functioning, nor is it able to support them in getting their children back, mostly due to the lack of services and the geopolitical context. In the parents' views, the justice and welfare Israeli systems do not only take their young children away from their parents but also prevent their options for reunification (Eissa and Zeira 2024).

In this complex geopolitical environment, parents feel they 'lost' their children to the state, which is perceived as their enemy rather than a supporting institution that can help them (Nasasra 2022). The cultural gaps between the Palestinian population and the Israeli institutions and state further increase the sense of loss, as children removed from home are also removed from their natural cultural environment.

The political and bureaucratic reality leaves many parents in East Jerusalem with the dilemma of either leaving their children in the hands of the Israeli welfare system to sustain their resident status or taking them back home and losing their status and rights in Israel (Tamimi 2017).

The findings also suggest parents whose children have been removed from home develop various narratives to describe their experiences, ranging between acceptance and resistance. The narrative of acceptance and resignation may be related to the social stigma associated with shame and guilt, which makes them feel different and socially excluded (Goffman 1963). Parents in our study expressed feelings of shame in the face of society due to their perceived failure in caring for their children and subsequently created a new narrative that justified the removal.

This finding is supported by Morriss's (2018) study, which showed how mothers challenge stigma by introducing new narratives that explain the child removal. Accordingly, some of our participants showed that by accepting the removal, they were able to keep the children's legal status and ensure a better future for them, thus withstanding expectations as parents by prioritizing their children's needs over everything else.

Other parents presented a narrative of resistance and anger, alienating themselves from the system that took away their children from them. Research shows that parents may feel transparent and inferior when dealing with the child protection system (Gibson 2020) and that removing a child from home often increases the conflict with the system and provokes enormous emotional chaos (Baum and Negbi 2013; Syrstad and Slettebø 2020). Although some parents take responsibility for their role in the removal (Baum and Negbi 2013), others, particularly in our study, focus on blaming the system, reflecting their complex relationship with Israeli institutions (Nasasra 2022).

4.2 | Coping Strategies

The analysis yielded three main coping patterns of parents, ranging from helplessness to control. Lack of control over the situation and acceptance of the child removal is on one end of the continuum. This pattern was found among mothers who lacked status and family support and who were often victims of domestic violence themselves. These mothers recreated coping patterns from the past, expressing helplessness and an inability to influence their situation, putting their faith in God as a higher power (Firman and Gila 2012).

Parents in the middle of the range expressed hope of survival. By legitimizing the removal, parents navigate the tension between helplessness and the need to sustain agency (Van Vooren and Lembrechts 2021). This does not imply full agreement with the system but rather a survival mechanism, enabling them to endure and function despite the trauma.

The coping mechanism at the far end of the range was the perception of the loss as temporary. One that could be changed by the parents themselves, granting them more power and control. Some parents, in different ways, clarified that they are the children's caregivers and that the removal from home is a temporary situation that usually stems from injustice. This pattern was demonstrated mainly by fathers who tried to maintain their patriarchal status and gender role in a society that expects them to protect their family (Ball 2010). The removal from home, as described by the parents, created cracks and dismantled the traditional male roles by destroying the tradition in which the father was the protector of his family members (Duran and Duran 1995).

5 | Conclusions

The main goal of this study was to bring forward parents' perspectives about removing their children from home in a complex political context of a conflict zone. We argue that to effectively intervene with children who are victims of abuse and neglect, it is imperative to explore their parents' feelings and perceptions about the removal and its consequences.

5.1 | Theoretical Implications

The main theoretical contribution of this study lies in its illustration and deepening of the concept of *intersectional marginalization* within the specific context of East Jerusalem families whose children were removed from their homes by court order. Both children and parents are profoundly affected by the surrounding geopolitical reality: Children's trauma is intensified by the harsh and ongoing conflict (Eissa and Zeira 2024), whereas the same oppressive environment undermines parents' ability to provide adequate care (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015). In this context, hardships do not merely accumulate—they multiply. As the theory of intersectionality suggests, each additional layer of marginalization deepens the complexity and intensity of lived experiences (Krumer-Nevo and Komem 2015). Moreover, the difficulty of accessing and researching such doubly marginalized populations contributes to ongoing misunderstandings and, in turn, systemic mistreatment. By highlighting the intersectional nature of marginalization in this setting, the study draws attention to critical issues that must be considered by professionals and policy-makers when addressing the needs of East Jerusalem's population, particularly families labelled as dysfunctional.

5.2 | Practical Implications

The question that arises in this context is whether it is possible to treat children when they are separated from their families. How is it possible to make a change at the micro level when a change at the macro level is not possible? Does a mother without civilian status in Israel who has been abused along with her children not have the right to receive help just because of her lack of status in Israel? Does she not have the right to get her child back? The parents described an endless cycle: Children are removed from home due to an unsuitable environment, and the environment is not treated due to the geopolitical reality. So, whose children are they? How can we save them while protecting the family unit?

This study focuses on the experiences of Palestinian families from East Jerusalem, who live in various challenging circumstances. We aimed to shed light on the strategies these parents

were using to navigate the challenges after their children were removed from home by an Israeli court. Central to this investigation is understanding how parents maintain relationships with their children postremoval while managing social expectations and parental roles. These parents face rejection of the right to care for their children, lose contact with them and lose control and responsibility for raising their children (Said Salem and De Wilde 2022).

5.3 | Policy Implications

Another question that arises from the findings is the place of the state versus the family in a geopolitically sensitive context, like that of East Jerusalem. The population in this research is a vulnerable minority with an undermined status, with less-than-equal social opportunities by legal definition (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2019). Under these circumstances, it should be asked whether the state has the right to intervene in the intimate family cell, particularly when social services and treatment options are so limited for this particular population (Eissa and Zeira 2024).

We argue that the current policy reinforces parents' exclusion due to a misunderstanding of their challenges. Misunderstanding of challenges, such as meeting the *centre of life* test, may label parents as giving up their children and as uncooperative. Our findings stress that to care and provide the best support for families at risk in a complex political context, one must understand the role and effect of the removal from home on the parents, and to look at the family (the parents and their victimized children) as one complete care unit (Allbaugh et al. 2024). No such family can be adequately treated by a system that separates children from their parents or denies them services due to the different legal statuses of family members.

6 | Limitations

This exploratory study has some limitations. The first limitation relates to the language. Participants were interviewed in Arabic to ensure they could express themselves accurately. These interviews were then translated into Hebrew, with selected quotes also translated into English. Despite careful efforts to maintain accuracy, some cultural nuances were lost in translation. Feedback from Arabic-speaking research fellows was sought to minimize these gaps while maintaining participant privacy, but not all discrepancies could be completely resolved.

Although generalization in qualitative research involves the analytical transfer of insights from one context to others that share similar structural characteristics, another limitation may result from the limited context of the findings to East Jerusalem compared with other conflict zones. Indeed, our findings reflect the specific experiences of parents of young children at risk from East Jerusalem whose children were removed from their homes by court order due to maltreatment. Yet, they may also be relevant to other marginalized populations experiencing overlapping legal, political and cultural constraints, such as families living under contested citizenship regimes, asylum-seeking parents or ethnic minorities in politically complex regions. The lessons for practice and policy, particularly the need to consider contextual factors such as culture, legal status and structural exclusion, may thus have broader applicability. Future research should focus on how these dynamics manifest in different geopolitical settings.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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