

“Restraint” or Racism in Palestine?

Hanan Ashrawi

‘Blaming the victim’ has been the common resort of the guilty in rationalizing and distorting the horror of the crime itself.

Whether battered wives, abused children, or Palestinians long subjected to the brutality of the horrendous Israeli military occupation, the first (and last) resort of the cowardly is in maligning the victim, in accusing him/her/them of having brought about the deserved cruelty of the crime.

The essential prerequisite, of course, is the total dehumanization of the victims and the elimination of their most basic rights and attributes as well as claims to protection.

Inevitably, the resultant compound victimization is further enhanced by increased vulnerability, distortion, and exclusion from the protection of human consideration and moral imperatives.

Hence, the latest eruption of confrontations between the Israeli occupation army and civilian Palestinian protestors became the playing field for the full force of the Israeli ‘spin machine’ in a most deliberate, concentrated, and racist exercise of deception and dehumanization directed against a whole people.

The most basic form of deception is in fabricating a false symmetry between occupier and occupied, between oppressor and victim. The ‘violence’ of the powerful Israeli occupation army using live ammunition, tanks and helicopter gun ships is (at best) equated with the ‘violence’ of Palestinian civilians protesting their victimization and continued loss of rights, lands, and lives.

In addition, the Palestinians are called upon to be docile, to stop the ‘violence,’ to end the ‘siege’ of Israel – as though the strongest army in the region is being ‘threatened’ by the unarmed people’s rejection of its occupation and brutality. The obvious and simple solution, of course, is to withdraw the army and end the occupation.

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This, ironically, is accompanied by a devaluation of Palestinian rights and lives by translating our objective weakness into a diminution of rights whereby the powerful determines the parameters of 'justice' for the weak.

The whole presentation constantly exhibits the 'white man's burden' syndrome. Palestinians should be 'grateful' for whatever 'generous offer' Israel chooses to 'grant' them, regardless of the glaring injustice and illegality of the Israeli negotiating stance.

Both the extreme right and extreme left in Israel (as well as the US) have adopted this condescending, patronizing approach to peace – Barak has gone the 'farthest' in 'offering' the Palestinians almost 90% of their lands with some 'responsibilities' in Jerusalem, and those 'ungrateful' Palestinians are being 'intransigent' and hardline.

Having compromised ourselves down to 22% of historical Palestine, we are now being asked to be party to Israel's illegal annexation of Jerusalem and its settlement policies – i.e. an unholy partnership for the violation of international law and the relevant UN resolutions.

Should we be unwilling to self-negate, to refuse the role of good little natives, and to continue rejecting the Israeli unilateral version of 'peace' that 'offers' us a subservient statelet of isolated Bantustans under Israel's apartheid system, then we will be pounded into submission.

After all, if pressure and threat and political arm-twisting do not work, sheer naked military aggression can produce the desired results – since 'Arabs understand only the language of violence.'

Instant scare tactics or panic politics come into play with such labels as the 'terrorist' or 'dictatorial' or 'violent' Palestinians, while depicting the reality of the Palestinian human will to resist subjugation and oppression as proof of such misrepresentations.

A catch-22 situation is clearly visible: Arafat must 'control' his people (nation of sheep?) and 'order' them to calm down and accept their enslavement and repression by the Israelis, otherwise he is no longer a 'peace partner' and cannot be considered a 'leader.'

At the same time, Israel cannot deal with Arafat or the Palestinians because they are inherently 'undemocratic' and therefore have nothing in common with such 'civilized' democracies as Israel and the US.

In parallel, other ready-made labels and stereotypical epithets are easily pulled out as a convenient branding exercise to reduce the humanity of the Palestinians.

The historical and familiar slurs used by Israeli officials and public figures (including cockroaches, two-legged vermin, dogs) have been expanded to include 'snakes' and 'crocodiles.'

The reduction of our humanity to a series of abstractions is nowhere as sinister as in the numerical game. Palestinian victims of Israeli live fire are daily given as 'x' numbers killed and 'y' numbers wounded. Their names, identities, dashed hopes, and shattered dreams are nowhere mentioned. Absent too are the grief and anguish of their mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and other loved ones who will

have to live with that tragic loss.

The visual documentation of the cold-blooded murder of the child Muhammad al-Durra shattered the complacency of those who had been comfortable with the anonymity of the Palestinians and the invisibility of their suffering. Even then, the Israeli propaganda machine tried to distort the truth even in the face of irrefutable evidence.

First, it was said that he was killed by Palestinian 'gunmen.' Then, he was 'caught in the crossfire.' The worst version was in the cynical depiction of the child Muhammad as a 'trouble-maker' or a 'mischievous' child who brought it upon himself – as though the proper response to a child living his childhood is deliberate death. The last accusation involved a question: 'What was he doing there?' The real question should have been 'what was the Israeli army doing there' in the heart of Palestinian Gaza shooting at civilians including a child and his father who had been caught red-handed attempting to indulge in the 'provocative' act of shopping together.

Note the difference, however, when two Israeli undercover agents, belonging to the notorious Israeli death squads, were killed by Palestinian protestors.

No Palestinian attempted to justify the act. Rather orders were issued to investigate and arrest those responsible. After all, there should be such a thing as the rule of law and due process.

Instead, Israel moved its tanks and armies even closer to tighten the siege and strangulation of Palestinian towns, villages and refugee camps. Then it brought in its Apache helicopter gun ships and shelled Palestinian cities and towns in a most senseless and cruel form of collective punishment.

Its version of events presented the Israeli agents as reservists who had mistakenly 'strayed' into Ramallah and then were 'lynched' by the mob. References to 'slaughter' and 'bloodthirsty' and 'savagery' became the prevalent verbal currency.

While no one would condone the killing of the soldiers, it is important however, to deal with the real facts and the context.

Ramallah, as a city under total Israeli military siege, was closed off to all movement in or out of the city. Only one entrance was open, entirely under the control of multiple Israeli military checkpoints. Thus to 'stray' into Ramallah would require deliberate and repeated attempts requiring tenacity, persistence, and even guile.

The two Israeli agents were clearly infiltrated and planted into the midst of a protest march in the heart of the city. The occasion was the funeral of a Palestinian man, Issam Joudeh Hamad, from the village of Umm Safa, who had been abducted by Israeli settlers and tortured to death in a most grisly manner.

Gruesome footage and photographs of the body, plus the testimony of the doctors who had examined it, were not repeatedly displayed before the eyes of the world for the sake of scoring points or dehumanizing the Israelis. Some Arab stations informed me that the images were so horrific that they refrained from using them.

Most of the people participating in the march (in the besieged Palestinian city of Ramallah) knew the victim, and some had seen the body. The two undercover Israeli agents who had infiltrated the march were recognized by the Palestinians as members of the 'Death Squads' that had been responsible for assassinations and provocations.

Despite the fact that the Palestinian police tried to protect them, the two were killed before the cameras.

This immediately became an instant justification for branding all Palestinians as murderers, and for the most systematic, venomous, hate campaign in recent history. It was also used as a justification for the Israeli aerial attacks on Ramallah and other Palestinian cities.

In his moving appeal to his compatriots (Oct. 13, 2000) not to exploit this incident to justify existing racism and hatred, Israeli poet Yitzhak Laor documents several lynchings of Palestinians by the Israeli army and security forces. In all cases the perpetrators were never punished, and no moral outrage was expressed by the Israeli public, let alone a shelling of Israeli cities!

The same applies to the Israeli settler reign of terror that targets Palestinians in their own homes and towns, with full Israeli military protection and collusion.

Presented as helpless 'Israeli civilians' surrounded by 'hostile' Palestinians, the sinister and lethal nature of settler violence, as armed extremists on the rampage, is often ignored. The illegality of Israeli settlements, the fundamentalist extremist character of the armed settlers, and the horrific acts of abduction, torture, killing and just random violence that are committed with impunity – they rarely get a mention.

Throughout all this, the Palestinians continue to be blamed.

The most blatantly racist slur is the Israeli theft of our humanity as parents. In an attempt to rob us of our most basic feelings for our children, we are accused of 'sending [our] children out to die' for the sake of 'scoring media points.'

The horror is further compounded by the total and unquestioning equanimity with which such a grand national slur is repeated by Israelis of all parties, with no critical distance or even awareness of the enormity of such a racist charge.

When Palestinian children became targets for Israeli snipers and other army violence, the ministry of education had no option but to close down the schools temporarily in order to minimize the students' exposure on the way to and from school.

That was immediately latched on to by the Israeli spin machine as proof that we closed down the schools in order to 'release' our children to go out and 'riot', thereby obstructing the free path of Israeli bullets.

The safety of home and parents' attempts at protecting their children are not even considered. Actually, the 18-month-old baby girl, Sara Abdel-Athim Hassan, was shot in the back seat of her father's car, while other child victims were killed in or around their own homes. Mu'ayyad al-Jawarish, 12 years old, was shot in the garden of his own home.

Most children were shot in the head or upper part of the body, mainly with

high velocity bullets. The most common targets of rubber-coated steel bullets were the eyes of children.

A shoot-to-kill (or permanently impair) policy has been in force by the Israeli army – claiming the lives of more than 105 Palestinians and wounding more than 3000 (many of whom with permanent injuries).

Israeli officials claim that they had exercised 'restraint.' Of course they can do worse – they can commit genocide or complete the ethnic cleansing begun in 1948. Still, it is Israeli 'security' that is at stake. Israel's powerful army of occupation cowers in fear at the Palestinian people's cry for justice and freedom.

The Palestinian people have no need for security on their own land or in their own homes since they have been thoroughly dehumanized by their oppressor as to deserve whatever happens to them.

Worse than being 'non-existent' (as in the myth of the 'land without a people for a people without a land'-which even Shimon Peres now seems to espouse), in the minds of the official Israeli narrative, we now seem to be existent on a lower plain as a sub-human species, bereft of the most elementary qualities and rights that guide the conscience and moral values of humanity as a whole.

All this is for the sake of alleviating the guilt and responsibility of the real culprit.

Apologists for the Israeli occupation must find an alternative address to be blamed for the horror inflicted on the Palestinians – so who better than the victims themselves?