

Israel's Violations of Palestinian Human Rights in the Occupied Territories

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This paper addresses the violations of Palestinian human rights by the state of Israel in the Palestinian Occupied Territories of the West Bank, including Jerusalem and the Gaza strip. Palestinians and peace activists have pursued this topic for thirty-seven years. Israel has occupied these territories since 1967, by far the longest occupation in recent history.

Until quite recently, Israel denied and concealed its identity as a nuclear superpower; this well known fact was, thus, an inexplicable scandal. Today, Israel represents itself as a nuclear power with a declared threatening strategic arsenal. Just two weeks ago, Israel announced the formation of a strategic committee of nuclear preventive security (actually pre-emptive or, worse, preventative).

The local and international media facilitates images of all sorts of imaginable and unimaginable sorts of humiliation, killings, torture of a whole nation subjected on a daily basis to these atrocities. The President of the Palestinian people, Yassir Arafat, has been under siege for four consecutive years. Every single town, village, and refugee camp, every single individual, including embryos, is subjected to inhumane treatment. A day in the life of a Palestinian is a repeated chapter of every other day. What one person passes through every day is the same for everyone else throughout the year, unless a bullet ends your life because a soldier or a settler (male or female) shoots you.

I have to confess that I am tired and frustrated by having to go through the long list of Israeli violations of our mere being. I can no longer listen to my fellow citizens describing their suffering, see their tears in the morning report after crossing walls, checkpoints, walking in the mud or dust to be on time at the office, for example, at ten o'clock instead of eight o'clock. Patients as well as doctors and nurses, come in to my office, with mud or dust on their shoes, trousers, and skirts, as if they come out of prison slavery. I wonder if you get tired of hearing the Palestinian story emanating suffering and torture; it is a tiring, boring story. It has been recounted so many times, in a way that the killing and devastation have become something normal as if it were everyday bread. Nevertheless, let us be careful! Why does this happen? I hope the answer is not a sort of conditioning or numbing. I hope it is not that the value of the Palestinian is now considered less than human, less than of equal value. Do you recall the Hollywood movies of the 20th century when hundreds of red Indians were killed, and the spectators applauded the hero, the white man, killing them?

How was the stereotyped image of an Arab formulated? Who was the accomplice? Was it the Western media, Hollywood, the politicians, or all? Does the biblical culture that occupied the back of the Western mind form the bigotry? Who causes U.S. torturers to treat Iraqis like dogs? And in Israel, how does it happen that politicians, media and soldiers treat Palestinians as if they are animals? Does Western culture consider itself in conflict with the culture of the Arabs?

Sharon

By overestimating his charisma, Sharon is given to excessive self-confidence. He belittles the Palestinian people, and ignores the Palestinian Authority. Instead he focuses on US President George W. Bush from whom he procured a letter, which included two U.S. concessions:

1. Bush indicated that Palestinian refugees would not be permitted to return to their homeland, and
2. Bush acknowledged, with an implicit reference to Israeli settlement blocks, that any final agreement would have to take account of the fact that the situation on the ground had changed.

The assumption that words from Bush would work miracles proved false because Bush has lost much of his credibility as U.S. president. He is now under attack for the way he functioned in connection with the events of September 11. He finds it hard to explain his decision to invade Iraq. Seeking a diplomatic achievement to pull him out of the mess, he took Sharon's bait. This meant presenting a unilateral Israeli disconnection plan as part of the *road map*, but few were fooled. Through his letter to Sharon, he fortified his position as honest broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—and now, as it turns out, for nothing but international disapproval in return. In addition to this failed gamble, Washington is now faced with photographs of U.S. troops abusing and torturing Iraqi prisoners, men and women, thus, further tarnishing its image in the Arab world.

This disconnection plan is unworkable. Israel cannot disengage unilaterally from its occupation of thirty-seven years. Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum. With no one else to take over, Israel would still be the occupying power and still control all the gates of Gaza—on land and sea and air—and in this sense too, it would remain responsible for the suffering inside.

We can understand, then, why the notion of unilateral disconnection got the cold shoulder from Jordan and Egypt, two states that have found a *modus vivendi* with Israel. The plan is not a political program, but rather Sharon's revenge on the Palestinians because they have not played by Israeli rules. Behind it lies an unresolved contradiction on the Israeli side: Neither the right nor the left has sufficient power to offer a real alternative to the present deadlock. This alternative would be a peace agreement, including an end to the occupation, yet the present leadership refuses to consider such a price. Foremost, like its predecessors, the Sharon regime wants to perpetuate Israeli supremacy, which implies, among other things, keeping the Palestinians from attaining real sovereignty. For another thing—as with all its predecessors—it is not prepared to confront the extreme right and the settlers, because such a confrontation

would rip apart the frayed fibers that still hold Israel together. Thus, we witness a single phenomenon with different nuances.

All the Israeli leaders have been undermined in record time because of the same dilemma. Ehud Barak “burned his credit” within eighteen months. As for Sharon, he is now a minority within his own party and coalition. In the opposition, however, including the Labor party and even parts of *Yahad* (formerly Meretz), his plan found firm support. By hoping that Sharon would “pluck its chestnuts out of the fire,” facing up to the settlers, the opposition manifested its inability to present a program of its own. It has no other way out of the impasse. As though he were trying to prove that he is number one in mounting collective assassinations, Sharon has ordered that the population of *Rafah* be massacred. The town is the poorest in the Occupied Territories of Gaza, home to some 145,000 people, 87,000 of which are refugees.

The Israeli army, as you know, has killed forty-eight people there, all civilians, including children and women. These atrocities have been graphically documented, and they cast aside many pretexts of security claimed by Israel. In fact, the images leave no doubt that is an operation of extermination against a civilian population totally defenseless in the face of bombings of which they are being subjected to from the air, sea and the ground, all with a sophisticated hi-tech U.S. arsenal. Thousands of news agencies around the world featured a photograph of a tormented father running with the body of a child in his arms.

In addition to premeditated collective assassinations, Israeli soldiers demolish houses, making the horrifying scene ever more desolate. Bulldozers approached a grandmother to demolish the roof over her head. Israel openly ignores every international convention that regulates military behavior and protects the civilian population in cases of military occupation. It is a matter of war crimes committed by Israel, which for half a century has carried out a plan of extermination against Palestinians. Israeli’s ambassador Dan Guillerman at the UN had the gall to claim that the information spread all over the world of the events in Rafah, was false, though he stopped short of claiming that the pictures circulating around the world had been revised. He also claimed that Palestinians ruined their own homes to gain compensation.

If Israel’s mentors and protectors in Washington can bomb, torture and kill with impunity in Iraq, who will stop Tel Aviv from doing the same in the Occupied Territories of Gaza and the West Bank? What is truly disgusting to the international community is that the authors of these crimes use words like security, peace, self-defense and freedom to justify their actions. In reality, as it is obvious to all, the main problem for life and well being is precisely the US military presence and its unconditional support to Israel under the complacent gaze of the other so-called western powers.

Torture

Horrible images of systematic Gestapo-like torture and sexual abuse of Iraqi prisoners at the US Abu Ghraib concentration camp should come as no surprise to us. This is what we would expect from an occupation! The annals of the popular struggle to end British imperial rule, from India to Ireland during the 20th century, are full of shameful episodes of brutality and terror by the instruments of British imperialism. The French settlers' atrocities in Algeria are another chapter. In Palestine, for hundreds of thousands it is something familiar. My memory has not to go back; I still feel it on my skin. As a matter of fact, there was a little surprise: the astonishing similarity between Abu Ghraib in Baghdad and Moscobiya Prison in Jerusalem. This I didn't expect. There are reports about Israeli officers assisting the U.S. Army. Whether this information is true or not, torture in Israel is a routine and daily practice. It is not enough to condemn the U.S. in Iraq, while ignoring Israel's programmed methods of torturing Palestinians.

Israel claims, as does the US, that the treatment of prisoners is in accordance with moral and legal standards. In Israel, the army and the government consider torture an accepted and necessary procedure. They legalize torture. On September 6, 1999, the Israeli high court banned some methods of torture, but not torture as such. It even allowed the Knesset to grant the Shin-bet the right to practice torture legally, not excluding women and children.

From March 2002, Human Rights' groups monitored an outrageous escalation of torture in the Occupied Territories, in a clear breach of the Geneva Conventions that imperialist powers always cite when it suits them. When they are asked, the army and the government say they are investigating the specific allegations made by soldiers or interrogators. In one case, the Israeli court convicted one soldier to pay one shekel (25 cents) to the family of a killed Palestinian. The same court accredited torture in one hundred twenty-four other cases. There are thousands of affidavits of Palestinian prisoners, including myself, before the UN Special Commission on Human Rights in New York and Geneva; all describe torture and sadistic behavior of soldiers and investigators.

Administrative detention, which is a detention without charge or trial, is another form of torture. It is carried out on the basis of military order No. 1229 of 1985. This order allows the military commanders to detain any individual for up to six months if they have reasonable grounds to presume that the security of the area or public security require such detention. It can be extended if the order does not define a maximum cumulative period of administrative detention. The terms security of the area and public security are not defined; the interpretation is being left to the military commanders.

There are seven thousand Palestinians imprisoned in Israel; more than four hundred thousand are under administrative detention. Israel arrests twenty-five to thirty Palestinians every twenty-four hours. In thirty-seven years of occupation, six hundred fifty thousand Palestinians have been subjected to arrest, once in their lives, at least. In other words, almost fifty percent of Palestinians adults have experienced imprisonment and torture. Post-traumatic stress syndrome is a common phenomenon in Palestine. The full extent of this same horror is reverberating throughout occupied Palestine and Iraq and continuously firing the flames of the resistance.

Let me say a few words about the Islamic movement, and specifically about Hamas, which is an outcome of the failure of the Palestinian Authority and the political parties. Fatah started as the governing party, headed by Arafat, and it has ended as the party of the governor. The other political parties collapsed with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Hamas

The Israeli policy in the OPT, based on the maximum use of military force and the punishment of the people at the economic level, has increased the power of Hamas. At the same time Hamas has grown closer to achieving the goal of spreading its control over the Palestinian areas.

For half a century, the Islamic movement has been an essential component, gradually increasing, in the Palestinian political perspective. Sometimes, it is revealed in its social or reformative dimension, and other times excessively violent and deeply politicized through these two tasks. The movement is becoming more popular day by day. Hamas is a strong competitor to Fatah as well as to the National movement, i.e., the PLO factions. The base of Hamas' strength is threefold:

1. Their ideology is crystal clear and their program is simple.
2. They provide social services to the masses and the foundation of an effective safety net for social assistance, and
3. They enable harm and cause damage to Israel.

Still, one of the main elements that empower Hamas is attributed to the failure of the PA as an embryo-state to protect and safeguard its citizens. In addition to its failure the political level, the PA is unable to accomplish the right to self-determination. Hamas put at stake the failure of Oslo Accords; the Palestinian Authority was unable to deliver.

Contrary to secular factions Hamas is flexible. It takes into consideration public opinion, it reads carefully the general mood if Hamas does not synchronize with the masses, and it finds

ways and means not to be face to face or in direct contradiction with the people. Therefore, taking into consideration all these arguments, although Hamas' record is terrible, it is not wise to stop Hamas based on military grounds. The main challenge is at the social and ideological level that Hamas represents. There is a need for an alternative. Tragically, the only formula adopted by the Israelis and the U.S. is confrontation. The destruction of the infrastructure of Hamas as a pre-condition to any political move is a civil war. Hamas will not be defeated, and peace will not prevail.

Conclusion

While some in the U.S. now admit the abhorrent aspects of their history, and recognize that racism against Indians (i.e. Native Americans) and Blacks, was wrong, most in the U.S. remain accepting of one form of racism: anti-Arabism. Arabs are the new Blacks and Indians, the new savages to be vanquished, subjugated, and treated like animals [dehumanization].

The infamous movie "Birth of a Nation" depicted Blacks as sexual predators eager to rape white women. In that scene of the movie "Never Say Never Again", when the blonde hair is revealed, Arabs go wild. Media and politicians continually present Arabs as a threat. Just as Anti-Black racism justified slavery and later segregation, and racism against Indians justified expansion and reservations. Anti-Arabism justifies dispossession, uprooting of Palestinians, and US seizure of Arab oil. Anti-Arabism is also the last acceptable theological racism, perpetrated by Christian Zionists. Since anti-Arabism is so prevalent and force-fed by politicians, the media, and Hollywood, is it really surprising that US soldiers and Israeli soldiers treat Arabs like animals, rather than human beings?

When Bush deems it acceptable to support ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians and further encroachment of their land, and his army commanders think it all right to massacre over six hundred Iraqis in Falluja, is it surprising that interrogators treat prisoners like animals? Is it surprising that Sharon levels a Rafah refugee camp to the ground? Is it surprising that Israeli courts sentenced a Palestinian legislative council member to forty years plus five life sentences?

The vast majority of U.S. citizens differ in their view of the world and the Middle East from that of Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld. The vast majority of Israelis are unlike Sharon and Mofaz. The vast majority of Arabs are unlike Bin Laden. Palestinians are unlike terrorists; the vast majority of Palestinians are lovers of peace and the rule of democratic constitutional law, both of which Israel lacks. Palestinians are more like the American people than are the 1) Zionists of Israel, 2) the terrorists of Islam and 3) the neoconservatives all of whom hold as hostage the security of the world.

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