

Support Gone Astray: The Responsibility of Arab Culture in the Continuation of the Palestinian Tragedy

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Brief Analysis

Instead of parsing the contradictions faced by Palestinian militants, Arab culture has engaged in a decades-long project of crime normalization.

Occupation is humiliation, administrative detention is an affront to dignity, and depriving a person of his or her sovereign freedom is injustice under any condition. Accordingly, the right of an individual under occupation to resist and seek the restoration of his or her freedom is thus to be recognized. Yet these truths do not excuse the current reality of the Palestinian territories: what some Palestinian militants engage in, while presented as resistance, is a commission of an abject injustice, not a realization of justice. Knifing a bystander is not the means to regain lost rights. Brainstorming creative means to harm the innocent in no way equates to supporting the oppressed. And aggression against these innocents -- men and women, young and old -- is not an act that bestows honour on the perpetrators, their supporters, or any culture that finds these acts praiseworthy.

Israeli authorities may have resorted to excessive force in their effort to thwart a third intifada. Israeli society may have turned toward accepting a heightened use of force. Yet the factors contributing to such a reality in Israel ought to be scrutinized. For instance, Arab media is saturated with solemn declarations that Israel -- as a state and as a society -- should be eliminated. Virtually all Arab media jubilantly welcomes the killing of any Israeli. It is only reasonable to expect that this attitude results in an Israeli hardening of position and action as a response to this open intent to harm, even if the intent remains unfulfilled due to the lack of capacity.

Meanwhile, the Arab media often presents robust condemnations of Israeli crimes. It is legitimate, desired, even required that individuals and parties committed to human rights in word and deed object to excessive use of force. But the case changes when powerful outrage and sharp accusations stem from parties who have turned a blind eye toward or even engaged in ongoing oppression orders of magnitude larger than the crimes of the party they accuse. More than generic hypocrisy, this outrage must be seen as a symptom of severe dissonance in Arab culture. Despite its claimed apparent support for the Palestinian cause, Arab culture is complicit in the perpetuation of the

Palestinian tragedy, and seemingly incapable of the self-critique needed to halt the harm that it induces.

There is a need, now long overdue, for an honest reconsideration of the Arab approach to the Palestinian cause at the levels of principle and policy. The fundamental question, which Arab culture must address with open clarity, is whether it conceives of a place for Israel in the Arab region and in the Arab future.

This is not a question about the willingness of the Arab states to recognize Israel *quid pro quo*, since the Arab states have indicated their willingness to live "in peace, side by side" with Israel through the Beirut Peace Initiative, formulated at the 2002 Arab Summit. Yet the Arab Peace Initiative mandates "reaching an agreed-upon just solution for the problem of Palestinian refugees, on the basis of the UNGA Resolution 194," referencing the originally expected UN-established borders between Israel and Palestine in 1948.

The assertion's seemingly offensive phrasing prompts several existential concerns among those viewing the initiative from an Israeli perspective. In Israel, considering the possibility of a retreat to the 1967 borders, even with some modifications, prompts protests from nationalist and religious militants but nevertheless remains a subject of national discussion. And the idea of conceding the West Bank to a future Palestinian state, despite a deeply felt conviction in the legitimacy of Jewish control over the area, does not arouse angst in Israel. On the other hand, the issue of 1948 raised by the Arab Peace Initiative is for most Israelis tantamount to questioning their state's right to exist.

The official Arab response to initial expressions of this fear was to highlight the positive breakthroughs of promised peace and normalization included in the 2002 Initiative, categorizing the reference to UN Resolution 194 as part of the gradualism in the rehabilitation of Israel in Arab consciousness and its integration in the region. In 2002, this message was delivered with all the gravitas of the Arab political order as its guarantee.

Today, much of that gravitas has been spent, and the Arab political order is in shambles. More relevantly, the former order never seemed able or willing to usher Arab political culture toward a true acceptance of Israel as a reality. Instead, Arab political culture currently seems divided between two main camps in its position toward Israel: "resistance" and "moderation."

The "resistance" camp is explicit in its view and intent: Israel is a foreign implant and aggressor that ought to be excised and eliminated in order to restore a complete Palestine from the river to the sea. Past "resistance" discourse presented a dichotomy between Zionism -- a racist ideology denying the rights of the native population and excluding non-Jews from the national commonwealth -- and the proposed alternative of a tolerant, inclusive model that would invite all citizens of the land, Jews and Arabs, to shared living on the basis of equality and mutual respect. More recently, "resistance" discourse has abandoned its benign tone of compromise, the condemnation of Zionism, and the promotion of pluralism. Instead, it is today replete with vile anti-Jewish references to the "assassins of the prophets" and the "descendants of apes and pigs." According to this discourse, the ultimate fate of Israeli Jews is their disappearance.

In parallel to the "resistance" proposition, a "moderation" discourse has also coalesced. It displays no inclination toward immediate anti-Israel mobilization, calling instead for realism in understanding the regional balance of power. According to proponents of "moderation," it is futile to engage in costly confrontations that have little likelihood of success, especially since Israel is slated for extinction as a result of demographic imbalance between Arabs and Jews. Those advocates believe the demographic end of the Jewish state will hold true regardless of whether Israel opts for a two-state solution and retreats from 1967 Arab territory, earning itself a temporary reprieve, or continues to clutch on to the whole territory of Mandatory Palestine, hastening the advent of its certain end.

The disagreement in Arab culture vis-a-vis Israel is thus between the proponents of the elimination of Israel through

active "resistance" and the advocates of waiting for its extinction through passive "moderation." Either way, there is no room for Israel.

Hence, while Arab culture is divided in its interpretations of the type of action required, both groups attribute an anthropomorphic character to the collective entities of "Palestine" and "Israel," thereby elevating them above the individual in any consideration of interest. These entities are conceived as beings with human-like nature, worthy of love, hate, and passion. When Israel harms Palestine, it should be harmed in return as a punishment, even if the cost is some self-sacrifice. Israel is a collectively evil entity, therefore causing her pain has more value than any individual Palestinian life. Similarly, no apparent consideration is made for the lives of Israeli victims except to serve as a numerical measure for the pain inflicted on the entity of Israel. With this mentality, the higher the number of Israeli dead, the better the success. This critique is not to suggest that Arab culture is the only culture or group to adopt an anthropomorphic model to imagine its enemies. However, injecting these notions into the Palestinian resistance movement against the occupation has encouraged a further discounting of the value of individual human life.

When a Palestinian, in an act understood as resistance, attacks and kills an Israeli, anthropomorphism absolves Arab culture from calling this action by the name that a fair reflection would provide. The Palestinian, his just cause against occupation notwithstanding, has also committed a crime with his attack.

But anthropomorphism allows for the obfuscation of this crime: the Palestinian militant targeted the collective entity Israel, not an individual. The victim's name, friends, family, and dreams are dismissed. Arab culture's response to these elements is that Palestinians suffer from the trampling of their right to be recognized as individuals with names, families, and dreams far more than Israelis; it is Israeli culture above all that treats Palestinians as a monolithic collective, despising and oppressing it as a fact rather than a potential. This objection is not without merit, even when stated with rhetorical and polemical heft. But even if one takes into account the mutual dehumanization between Israelis and Palestinians in the context of their armed conflict, the negative contribution of Arab culture to this conundrum cannot be ignored.

These multifaceted dehumanizations are further developed by the fact that the conflict contains two sets of imbalanced confrontations. The first is the Palestinian-Israeli fulcrum of opposition. In this confrontation, Israel is the stronger party with much of the initiative power, while the Palestinians are a people under occupation and siege. Yet in the second confrontation, that of the larger Arab world and Israel, the Arab world by its sheer size and ability to threaten the existence of Israel serves as the stronger party, possessing greater capacity for the initiative. Therefore, if the intent is to reach a resolution, achieve peace and stability, and restore the right to live in freedom and dignity to both Palestinians and Israelis, it is incumbent on each stronger party to exercise its comparatively greater power of initiative.

Arab culture has not only been derelict in such initiative, it has strongly contributed to the exacerbation of the crisis. Instead of parsing the contradictions faced by Palestinian militants -- who through many of their acts become perpetrators of injustice in addition to victims of occupation -- Arab culture has engaged in a decades-long project of crime normalization. What was forbidden and denounced became allowed and tolerated, then desired and praiseworthy, and finally mandated and entitled to reward.

The end result is an Arab culture that calls for death and prides itself with murder as long as it is inflicted on the other. Meanwhile, it condemns killing and denounces the killer who attacks its supporters. This support has aided, abetted, and even induced a resistance movement gone astray. Genuine, meaningful support for the Palestinians requires the honesty of calling on militants to abstain from any act of injustice, however minor, even if they themselves are faced with ongoing injustice, however major. That which should be ultimately valued is the life of the individual, be they Palestinian or Israeli. ❖

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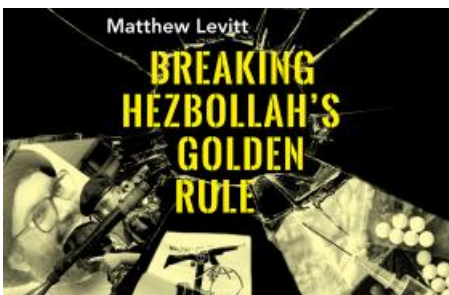
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