

An Arab Debate on 'Child Sacrifice'

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Articles & Testimony

Palestinian children are dying under Israeli gunfire. No doubt they are martyrs but to what, Israeli brutality or Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat's cynicism?

Increasingly, Western observers, and now, for the first time, Arab ones too, are concluding that the Palestinian Authority is pursuing a policy that intentionally places children in the line of Israeli fire.

While this topic has been covered extensively in the Western press, it has not been, at least until recently, a topic of discussion in the Arab press.

Last week, a few articles discussing this issue appeared in Arabic newspapers, setting off an animated debate about the value of child martyrs.

Since late September, over two dozen Palestinians age 17 and under have been killed by Israeli forces. The Palestinians have reaped public relations advantage from the "David and Goliath" struggle between Israeli tanks and Palestinian kids, an advantage Arafat hopes will serve his cause if and when negotiations resume.

The general Arab response to these tragic deaths has been purely critical of Israel without ascribing any untoward motives to the Palestinian leadership.

Most telling, perhaps, was the communique issued by the Arab summit on October 22, which hailed the blood of the Palestinian martyrs as "a precious asset for the liberation of the land." Given the overwhelming popular support in the Arab world for the uprising, it's not surprising that Arabic-language articles decrying the PA's mobilization of children have been limited and late in coming.

The strongest Arab condemnation of this pernicious practice appeared on October 25, in the London pan-Arab daily Al Sharq al-Awsat. In her courageous article titled "In Defense of Palestine's Children," the London-based Lebanese columnist Hoda Hussein viciously condemned the Palestinian leadership and specifically Arafat for this policy. "Are we so lacking in any means," she asks, "that we can do nothing but gamble with children's lives by pushing them to confront Israel?" She ponders "What kind of enlightened independence will rise on the blood of the children, while the leaders, [and] their [own] children and grandchildren, are sheltered?"

For Hussein, endangering children is a pointless, misanthropic Palestinian policy that will not force an Israeli

withdrawal, remove the contentious Ariel Sharon from Knesset, or extract additional Israeli peace process concessions. It is, she suggests, an ill conceived, cynical tactic. Hussein notes that the folly and immorality of the PA does not absolve Israel from responsibility for the deaths, but, she asks, first and foremost, "how about us [Arabs]?"

Palestinian officials were quick to react to the article. On October 30, Hafiz Barghouthi, the editor of Arafat's PA daily Al Hayat al-Jadida, wrote a scathing reply to Hussein's opinion piece. Barghouthi's article did not address the substance of the criticism but rather, delved into a lengthy ad hominem attack on Hussein's character. The problem, according to Barghouthi, is that "some of the Arab media have become too 'foreignized' [i.e., Westernized]" and subject to the influences of "Jewish money." He advises that writers like Hussein who are "Westernized in body and spirit" should cease writing. Instead of putting pens to paper, "they should place [their pens] elsewhere."

At the end of his diatribe, Barghouthi advocates that Westernized authors such as Hussein should "leave the campaign of lead pencils and instead communicate through lead bullets."

In a previous article, Barghouthi implicitly acknowledged and celebrated the role of children as the "shock troops" of Palestinian liberation. On October 27, Barghouthi wrote that preventing one's children from participating in protests constitutes "one of the most severe transgressions" which "harm us more than the bullets" of Israel.

For Barghouthi, Palestinians who refuse to endanger their children are like traitors; "they constitute a fifth column."

In the coming weeks as children continue to die in the PA, the nascent debate in the Arab press will continue. Meanwhile, perhaps predictably, back in London, Hussein has received a number of death threats for her unpopular views.

Still, it appears that her views may at least be having some rhetorical effect. On November 7, PA Minister of Information Yasser Abed Rabbo sent a letter to B'tselem pledging that the Palestinian leadership would prevent youths under 16 from participating in "intifada activities." Only time will tell whether this pledge will be honored, or go the way of so many other Palestinian pledges in recent weeks to halt the violence.

This PA decision, if implemented, could go a long way to curtailing some of the tragedies of the past month. But if the opinions of Hafiz Barghouthi are any indication, it is more likely that the PA will continue to exploit its children. Unless the PA determines that the practice has outlived its political utility, the "child sacrifice" will continue.

The writer is a research fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

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al-Sharq al-Awsat

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