

From Victim to Colonial Settler: Shifting the Paradigm on Israel

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Global Research, July 30, 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Law and Justice](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

"... To be committed to justice we must believe that ethics matter, that it is vital to have a system of shared morality." - Bell Hooks

"Out of nowhere many soldiers jumped out and ambushed Samir. They shot him first in the leg, yet he managed to run away towards the village. But how far can an injured child run? Twenty, maybe 30, meters? They could have easily arrested him, especially when he was injured, but instead they shot him in the back with live ammunition... To me this is premeditated murder." - Malek Murrar, 16, interviewed on 20 September 2013 at the site where he had witnessed his friend Samir Awad being murdered by Israeli security forces.

"The West's claim to moral superiority by championing universal human rights and the rule of law is a grotesque lie."



Palestinian life is cheap – something Samir already understood from his short 16 years of living under occupation. For the friends and family of Samir and the thousands of other Samirs murdered by the Israeli military and settlers over the last four decades, Palestinian life will still be cheap when the shooting stops, the Israeli military withdraws its ground forces from Gaza, and daily life under occupation returns to the norm of low-intensity systematic state terror.

The killings, breaking of bones, firing of tear gas canisters into enclosed spaces, and the daily humiliation of checkpoints, separate roads and separating walls will continue to be daily reminders to Palestinians that they are different; lesser; expendable.

From these experiences, Palestinians understand – like many of us on the receiving end of the Western world’s “civilizing mission” – that the West’s claim to moral superiority by championing universal human rights and the rule of law is a grotesque lie.

Over the years, Palestinians have seen how they can be murdered in the hundreds and thousands with impunity and in the full glare of the mass media. And while most of the non-Western world is stunned by the indiscriminate viciousness of the Israeli attack, headlines in Western media outlets proclaim “ Hamas lays siege on Israel” and “ Hamas terrorizes Israel” – as though the over one thousand lives of murdered Palestinians are completely irrelevant and devoid of value.

The devaluing of Palestinian life is in stark contrast to the concern for the dignity of the remains of the victims of Malaysia Airlines flight M17, recently shot down over Ukraine. It is also reflected in the arguments of the Israeli propagandists, who imply that Western news media should stop covering the deaths of Palestinian civilians because it satisfies the strategic objective of the “ Hamas terrorists.”

The scenes of carnage – Palestinian bodies littering the streets of Shujaiya; whole families packed into cars, desperately trying to flee the onslaught of Israeli rockets and naval bombardments; and a vicious scorched-earth ground operation in which whole communities are free-fire zones for Israelis, have still not been enough to generate much empathy for the lives of Palestinians for many in the U.S. A recent Gallop poll of opinion in the U.S. suggests that 71% of the respondents who claim to follow the Israeli-Palestinian conflict closely say that Israeli actions in Gaza are justified. ⁱⁱ

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And in Western capitals, the defenders of “universal” human rights proudly proclaim their unwavering support for Israel’s right of “defense” against a captured and largely defenseless people who are supposed to have special protections under international law.

The moral positions taken by many people in the West, especially in the U.S., confirms the existence of an ethical double-standard – one in which the actions of the Israeli state are framed as legitimate, reasonable and deserving of support, and one in which all acts of resistance on the part of the captured and oppressed Palestinians are seen as criminal, immoral and terroristic. ⁱⁱⁱ

The ethical double-standards for non-Europeans versus Europeans – or those who are associated with white power and European civilization, like the Israeli state – are grounded in a generalized acceptance of the civilizational superiority of the West and the division of humanity between those “like us” and “others” who have different standards of human behavior.

This division has always been a fundamental component of white supremacist thought that justified the conquest, pillage and exploitation of most of the non-Western world. The

violence of slavery, genocide of Native Americans and colonialism found its defenders among liberals and within the contradictory framework of Eurocentric, male-centered liberalism that divided humanity between those eligible for the full enjoyment of human rights – European male, capitalist property owners and eventually most people categorized as “white” irrespective of class and gender – and everyone else.

The “white man’s burden” “manifest destiny,” the “doctrine of discovery,” “American exceptionalism” – and their 21st century expression in humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect – these are all expressions of the arrogant pathology of the white supremacist worldview.

It is this sublimated framework that Israeli propagandists skillfully appeal to, in order to generate the continued moral and political support for their policies with large segments of the populations of Europe and especially within the white supremacist settler-state of the U.S.

Constructed as an uncivilized, barbarous, terrorist organization, Hamas has been effectively de-humanized – along with all of the Palestinian people of Gaza, since they voted for Hamas in the elections of 2006. In contrast, Israel is juxtaposed as innocent, civilized and humane.

Projecting itself as a superior civilization, Israel attempts to immunize itself from human rights charges, since as a “civilized” (read “Western”), humane and rational society, Israel by definition cannot be accused of engaging in massive human rights violations?

Instead it is the actions of the Palestinian resistance fighters that are highlighted, because that resistance provides a convenient weapon in the narrative created by Israel of Palestinian “otherness” where their legitimate resistance is instead twisted into being further evidence of their sub-human status.

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According to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Natahuyu, the value of human life is different for Palestinians and their leadership who want more dead Palestinians so that they can use “telegenically dead Palestinians”^{iv} for their cause. The logical corollary to this position is that it is perfectly understandable and justifiable that Israel is forced to kill hundreds of “them” in order to ensure Israeli security from these “barbarous” people who have a natural propensity towards violence, if they are not contained and periodically terrorized into submission.

For activists in solidarity with Palestinian desires for national self-determination, undermining the hegemony of the “innocent settler” narrative is imperative in order to counter the propaganda that justifies Israeli state and settler violence. To do so means centering colonialism and white supremacy as the grounding analytical categories and conceptual framework.

This is not necessarily a new argument or one that has not been embraced by some, but for various reasons, including bogus charges of anti-Semitism, many in the U.S. progressive and radical communities have eschewed this approach over the years.

The other challenge is that the “white supremacist” term has been domesticated and

reduced to a crude and relatively simple notion of “racism.” In this context, white supremacists and white supremacy is represented by easy targets like Donald Sterling and Tea Party members, while racialized imperialism is overlooked.

In order to re-position Israel in the public imagination, activists must overcome both of these issues if movements for solidarity and justice such as the growing boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement have any chance of being effective solidarity mechanisms.

Liberated from the racist bias of the colonial/imperialist lens that casts Israelis as victims, Israeli state actions and policies in Gaza are then stripped of the obfuscating claims of self-defense and concerns for Palestinian civilians. And ending ethical double standards by applying one standard informed by the principles of human equality and the rejection of all forms of dehumanizing oppression would clearly identify the real victims in the ongoing drama of the Israel/Palestinian conflict – and it would not be the state of Israel.

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Notes

i Malek Murrar, 16, interviewed on 20 September 2013 at the site where he had witnessed his friend Samir Awad being murdered by Israeli security forces, see Trigger-Happy: Israel’s use of Excessive force in the West Bank” <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE15/002/2014/en/349188ef-e14a-418f-ac20-6c9e5c8d9f88/mde150022014en.pdf>

ii <http://www.vox.com/2014/7/24/5934837/gallup-israel-gaza-americans>

iii The analysis here and what follows was greatly influence by the work of Cyra A. Choudhury, see “Comprehending “our” Violence: Reflections on the Liberal Universalist Tradition, National Identity and the War in Iraq,” Muslim World Journal of Human Rights, volume 3, Issue 1, 2006.

iv <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israelgaza-conflict-the-myth-of-hamass-human-shield-9619810.html>

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