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The Logic of Murder in Israel: A Culture of Impunity in Full View of the Entire World

By Ramzy Baroud
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"Whether he made a mistake or not, is a trivial question," said an Israeli Jewish man who joined large protests throughout Israel in support of a soldier who calmly, and with precision, killed a wounded Palestinian man in al-Khalil (Hebron). The protesting Jewish man described Palestinians as "barbaric', "bestial', who should not be perceived as people.

This is hardly a fringe view in Israel. The vast majority of Israelis, 68%, support the killing of Abdel Fatah Yusri al-Sharif, 21, by the solider who had reportedly announced before firing at the wounded Palestinian that the "terrorist had to die."

The killing scene would have been relegated to the annals of the many "contested" killings by Israeli soldiers, were it not for a Palestinian field worker with Israel's human rights group, B'Tselem, who filmed the bloody event.

The incident, once more, highlights a culture of impunity that exists in the Israeli army, which is not a new phenomenon.

Not only is Israeli society supportive of the soldier behind this particular bloody incident, almost a vast majority is in support of field executions as well.

In fact, the culture of impunity in Israel is linked both to political leanings and religious beliefs. According to the latest Peace Index released by Tel Aviv University's Israel Democracy Institute, nearly 67% of the country's Jewish population believes that "it is a commandment to kill a terrorist who comes at you with a knife".

Killing Palestinians as a form of religious duty goes back to the early days of the Jewish state, and such beliefs are constantly corroborated by the country's high spiritual institutions, similar to the recent decree issued by the country's Chief Sephardic Rabbi, Yitzhak Yosef. While 94% of ultra-Orthodox agree with the murder edict of Yosef, 52% of the country's secularists do, too.

In fact, dehumanizing Palestinians – describing them as "beasts", "cockroaches", or treating them as dispensable inferiors – has historically been a common denominator in Israeli society, uniting Jews from various political, ideological and religious backgrounds.

Rabbi Yosef's decree, for example, is not much different from statements made by Israeli Defense Minister, Moshe Ya'alon, and other army and government official, who made similar calls, albeit without utilizing a strongly worded religious discourse.

Using the same logic, the quote above describing Palestinians as beasts is not divergent from a recent statement made by Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. "At the end, in the State of Israel, as I see it, there will be a fence that spans it all," Netanyahu said in February. "In the area that we live, we must defend ourselves against the wild beasts," he added.

While pro-Israeli pundits labor to explain the widespread Israeli perception of Palestinians – and Arabs, in general – on rational grounds, logic and commonsense continues to evade them. For instance, Netanyahu's last war on Gaza in the summer of 2014 killed a total of 2,251 Palestinians – including 1,462 civilians, among them 551 children, according to a report prepared by the UN Human Rights Council. During that war, only six Israeli civilians were killed, and 60 soldiers.

Who, then, is truly the "wild beast"?

However, Palestinians are not made into beasts because of their supposedly murderous intent for, not once, statistically, in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict did Palestinians ever kill more Israelis, as opposed to the other way round. The ailment is not the number, but a common Israeli cultural perception that is utterly racist and dehumanizing.

Nor is the Israeli perception of Palestinians ever linked to a specific period of time, for example, a popular uprising or a war. Consider this eyewitness account from August 2012, cited in the Israeli newspaper, Haaretz, years before the current uprising in the West Bank and Jerusalem:

"Today I saw a lynch with my own eyes, in Zion Square, the center of the city of Jerusalem … and shouts of 'A Jew is a soul and Arab is a son of a –,' were shouted loudly and dozens of youths ran and gathered and started to really beat to death three Arab youths who were walking quietly in the Ben Yehuda street," the witness wrote.

"When one of the Palestinian youths fell to the ground, the youths continued to hit him in the head; he lost consciousness, his eyes rolled, his angled head twitched, and then those who were kicking him fled while the rest gathered around in a circle, with some still shouting with hate in their eyes."

Imagine this graphic account repeated, in different manifestations, every day in Occupied Palestine, and consider this: rarely does anyone pay a price for it. Indeed, this is how Israel's culture of impunity has evolved over the years.

According to Israeli human rights group, Yesh Din, "approximately 94% of criminal investigations launched by the IDF against soldiers suspected of criminal violent activity against Palestinians and their property are closed without any indictments. In the rare cases that indictments are served, conviction leads to very light sentencing."

And no one is immune. Israel's 972Mag wrote in December 2015 about the hundreds of violent incidents of Israeli forces targeting Palestinian medical staff. Palestinian rights group, Al-Haq, documented 56 cases in which "ambulances were attacked", and 116 assaults against medical staff while on duty.

How about violence meted out by illegal settlers whose population in the Occupied Territories is constantly on the increase?

Armed settlers rampage daily through villages of the Occupied West Bank and the neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. The number of their violent crimes has grown tremendously in recent years, and even doubled since 2009.

In August 2015, months before the current uprising, Human Rights Watch senior researcher,Bill Van Esveld, wrote:

"Settlers attack Palestinians and their property on a near-daily basis – there were more than 300 such attacks last year, but few attackers faced justice. In the past decade, less than two percent of investigations into settler attacks ended with convictions."

In case one is still fooled by the "rational" argument used to justify the murder of militarily occupied, oppressed and besieged Palestinians, Batzalel Smotrich, from the Jewish Home Party, which is part of Netanyhu's ruling coalition, protested via twitter that his wife was expected to give birth in the same hospital room where Arab babies are born.

His written "rationale", after declaring that his wife "is not a racist", "It's natural that my wife wouldn't want to lie next to someone whose baby son might want to murder my son."

The likes of Smotrich, and the majority of Israelis are morally blind to their own wrongdoing. They have long been sold on the idea that Israel, despite its brutality is a "villa in the jungle". According to a recent Pew survey, nearly half of Israelis want to expel Palestinians Arabs – Muslims and Christians, from their ancestral homeland.

The danger of impunity is not merely the lack of legal accountability, but the fact that it is the very foundation of most violent crimes against humanity, including genocide.

This impunity began seven decades ago and it will not end without international intervention, with concerted efforts to hold Israel accountable in order to bring the agony of Palestinians to a halt