

Arms and Virility: The Phallic Manifestations of the Last Israeli-Palestinian Round of Bloodshed

A talk delivered on April 8, 2008 at the University of Michigan Women Studies Department and Institute for Research on Women and Gender

Amira Hass

On two separate occasions, a Hebrew tabloid found two robbery reports fit for print: in both cases - lamented the robbed families - the most precious objects to have been stolen were the guns that had belonged to their soldier-sons, killed on duty – one in Hebron, the other in the Gaza Strip. The one had probably lost his life in an accident, the other to a Palestinian guerilla. In one of the reports family members recount how relentlessly they had had to contend with the army to keep that personal weapon. The army, for its part, disabled the rifle's firing mechanism. In the second case, the regional commander himself bequeathed the rifle upon the bereaved family as a special gift. One of the two mothers said: “This is the very weapon that accompanied Ariel throughout his military service. I don’t care about the jewelry and other objects that were stolen. It is just Ariel’s weapon, the one he was always touching, that I want back. We plead to have the gun returned to us”. Neither did the father of the other soldier care about the stolen jewelry. Important was only the gun that had been placed at the center of a small memorial sanctuary the family had created at home: “The important thing for me is to get up every morning and see the gun, and be reminded of Rotem. All I see in my mind's eye is Rotem, our son, coming home on leave with his weapon, caressing it, cleaning it. It was the love of his life”. This, indeed, is how soldiers are taught to treat their guns, an ex-soldier enlightened me: like a girl-friend you take care of, primp and pamper. And - the ex-soldier added without a hint of shyness - insert your fingers into.

Palestinian firearms are frequently caught and confiscated by the Israeli army after clashes and often after the Palestinian gunmen – by default the weaker party - had already been shot dead. What usually remains is a poster showing the killed man sporting a huge imposing gun, or emulating frozen heroic snapshots of past wars of liberation. In recent years, the walls of Palestinian cities, refugee camps and villages have been all but covered with such images, by now half torn, washed out or fading. It is said that for the first three or four years of the last round of bloodshed, Palestinian youngsters hurried to photo-studios to be photographed for posterity holding a gun: some did not

even know how to shoot and had no intention of actually participating in any battle. Assuming, with good reason, that their death by an Israeli soldier or bomber-pilot was immanent, the youngsters obviously preferred to be remembered as combatants.

Here, in the images and written reports, we might find subtly concealed, complementary definitions of virility, of manhood: In the Israeli examples, the adoration of the gun evokes the love and care for a woman in its protective simulation. Hence power of procreation - one definition of virility - is implied. Too young to leave any progeny behind, their gun is what remains for their parents to fondle. The Palestinian flirtation with the gun is more explicitly phallic, emphasizing an organ or object that differentiates man from woman, manhood from childhood, freedom fighter from passive victim. In both societies - particularly the Palestinian at present, but until recently this was characteristic of the Israeli - toy guns and other similar objects are mostly played with and cherished by boys, not girls.

It is through multi-focal lenses that I have been observing this seven-year-long round of bloodshed between Israelis and Palestinians, and what, for the sake of time and convenience, I will term “the second Palestinian Intifada”, in spite of the many shortcomings of this definition. I am a Jew living under Israeli occupation, an Israeli living among Palestinians and constantly navigating between the two societies, a woman, a leftist who opposes her own government’s policies, a feminist. Both an observer and a participant of sorts - I have never adhered to the myth of objectivity anyway. All of us - journalists as well - carry our habitus with us. I’d rather be honest and admit it than maintain some false pledge of “detachment”.

This talk allows me to go beyond the habitual and normative journalistic description and analysis of events and policies so familiar to a great part of the world by now.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to share some reflections about the two societies in which I live, reflections that were bound to be emerge but not always found their appropriate venue.

The outburst of thousands of raging Palestinian demonstrators by the end of September 2000 fell as a shocking surprise and cast a general spell of disenchantment upon most Israelis. This would not have happened had they chosen to assess reality beyond their immediate interests and benefits and away from the articulated promises of Israel's leaders. Reality, briefly, was that of great deception: under the guise of peace negotiations Israel enhanced its colonization process, manifested in three main

components: 1) ongoing incessant confiscation of Palestinian land and a rapid fragmentation of the territory destined to be a State; 2) denying the Palestinians their freedom of movement, both of which can be regarded comprehensively as a mass robbery of time and space; 3) further perfection of a multi-tiered system of laws, rights and infrastructures: one – superior - tier exclusively for Jews, and several others - inferior - for the sub-divided and stratified Palestinian People. This policy has been implemented in order to preserve Jewish hegemony at all costs, and to foil any chance of implementing the internationally accepted solution to the conflict: the two-state solution along the pre-1967 war borders.

It must have been sometime in the second or third week of the “Second Intifada” that the phallic features started to strike me. A bunch of Palestinian men were scurrying up and down my street, some waving guns and pistols and jerking off their bullets to the sky, far from - and practically harmless to - any enemy target. Prominently visible to international cameras and the public eye. The Israeli machine guns and cannons were, in contrast, well hidden but far more effective in targeting and inflicting casualties.

At the time I was living near a symbolic site of the Occupation. Why symbolic? Because the Israeli Occupation has excelled at producing discrete, subtle bureaucratic means of dispossession and control. Israel has perfected its colonialist policies since the mid 90's, when military presence was indeed reduced but not its undemocratic, totalitarian, hostile grip on people's lives. For outsiders and for Israeli observers it appeared to be a benign Occupation, lenient, almost on the verge of withering away. Not murderous, like so many other past and present regimes of oppression, the Israeli occupation became a reality by default, naturalized and standardized as the natural, unquestioned order of things that goes unnoticed; as Pierre Bourdieu describes masculine order: so naturalized, that it needs no justification.

Symbolic could be a junction on a road leading to a colony.

Take for example Ramallah's north-eastern exit junction, close to where I used to live, where the army hurried to place a temporary roadblock in order to protect a nearby huge, overbearing Israeli military base and an Israeli colony - both built a few meters away from and on the lands of Palestinian villages and a town. Such sites fill the West Bank and Gaza: junctions close to colonies, soon to be blocked for Palestinian movement, and to be reinforced by jeeps, pointed guns and later

omnipresent “pillboxes” - fortified concrete watch- and shooting towers, competing with mosque minarets over whose erect tip reaches up higher into the sky.

From the start, Israeli troops used live ammunition to disperse demonstrators, and from very early on, they did not hesitate to fire at unarmed civilians, including children: the orders, as an Israeli sniper told me, were not to shoot children under twelve years of age. In other words, they were free to shoot twelve-year-olds and up. The soldiers were also allowed to aim at upper parts of the body – that is, shoot to kill, as the young, naïve sniper went on telling me. As more civilians were killed and wounded - a demand for revenge took the lead among Palestinians. Children whose fathers were members of one of the many Palestinian security organs - were embarrassed by their fathers’ failure to use their guns. One such father told me his son stopped talking to him until he had to quit his regular job with the preventative security service and joined an embryonic cell of Fatah’s armed wing. Palestinian policemen, initially ordered to stay away from the demonstration sites at the fringes of Palestinian cities - were later seen firing in frustration at unknown targets – or, as a high-ranking Palestinian officer in Gaza told me, no less frustrated himself: they were shooting at the sun. He did not mean to dismiss their shooting skill, but surmised, rather, that there was no chance for an armed struggle to achieve any political goal. However, he could not call to a halt the ritual that has developed: a civilian protest demonstration proceeding towards a blocked edge of the city or a road, chanting, stone throwing at military jeeps or a military watchtower. Then Israeli soldiers target and shoot: from behind armored vehicles or from within well- hidden positions in Israeli colonies, from hills and military bases and watchtowers. Next, it is the Palestinian gunmen's turn to shoot, while the civilians disperse before and after some of them are injured or killed.

The young Israeli gunmen are defined as soldiers, because their three-year military service is mandatory. In contrast, no Palestinian is obliged to take up arms, and they are defined as policemen or members of Palestinian security organs when their voluntary enrollment on the PA payroll - mostly seeking an official salary and some social respectability - has been supervised and authorized by Israel and the donor countries to the PA. Otherwise, they are named gunmen or terrorists, combatants or insurgents.

When young Israelis are sent by the State to kill and be killed, this is anchored in years of socialization that internalizes national security reasoning and ideologies, peer-group fraternization patterns and trench camaraderie – long before the young men first reach their own trenches. All three elements are often fused together. Less frequently, one's very loyalty to one's own age-group

and close pals is sufficient grounds to obey the draft law and serve one's military term of duty in the Occupied Territories, regardless of his- and his family's - political inclinations to criticize the Israeli occupation policy. Such, incidentally, was the case of the son of writer David Grossman, posted at checkpoints in the West Bank before he was killed in Lebanon on a war mission. Conscription and

military service are an ongoing collective and individual social rite of passage from childhood into adulthood. For the past forty years, and all the more so in the last seven, this ongoing rite of adulthood involves long military service in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where the army's pronounced first and foremost duty is the protection of Israeli civilians – the colonists. Less evasively: military presence enables the unhampered and persistent expansion of colonies, constituting ongoing aggression against the Palestinian presence and future. For numerous Israelis, then, adulthood involves a long invasive, supremacist, coerced presence within and against a civilian population.

“My kid was ‘scratched’ – this is how weeping Jewish mothers commonly describe their sons, killed during their military service: - 'scratched' - *sarut* - is the slang synonym for someone addicted to something, totally dedicated, convinced out and out.

Few and far between are the parents who publicly question the cause in the fight for which their sons were killed. Few are the soldiers whom I encountered for the last seven years in countless military incursions and attacks who did not identify individually with their officially proclaimed mission of defending the People and the State. Their conviction only intensified when the Palestinians opted for suicide attacks against Israeli civilians.

In summer 2002, after a series of lethal incursions which followed lethal suicide attacks, following earlier Israeli lethal attacks and so on and so on, I exited Ramallah for the first time through a certain checkpoint which had long been closed, and then reopened, allowing the passage of “notables” only (diplomats, journalists, PA senior officials). The incredulous soldier looked at my ID again and again and finally exclaimed: but you are Jewish, what are you doing here? And I replied: but you are also Jewish, what are YOU doing here?! His response: Believe me, I have no idea. This was an exception. Most of the soldiers totally identify with their mission. Take this soldier, who let a long convoy of Palestinian cars wait for hours on end, at a northern checkpoint in the Jordan valley. Why are you doing this? I asked the young soldier whose Russian accent instantly disclosed his origin. “I am defending the State of Israel” he said – pointing at the hillside olive groves beyond the checkpoint.

This was Palestinian agricultural land in what is termed “Zone C” - 60% of the West Bank is Zone C - where, according to the Oslo accords, Israel maintains full administrative authority, where it expands its colonies and does not allow any Palestinian development, and which it hopes to annex when the time comes, at least great parts of it. That is what the soldier has been taught and now repeats: whatever is vacant land, without too many Palestinian residents, is Israel. As a side treat for his male ego, this was a chance to wield his power over hundreds of people. Some soldiers openly admit that this power can feel rather intoxicating.

Very often soldiers - young enough to have easily been my own sons - tell me, in a very protective, almost fatherly tone, “take care of yourself, it’s dangerous,” or “I advise you not to enter that city\|village”, meaning in fact - Palestinians are essentially dangerous, and you should listen to me, the grownup, the experienced, you should listen to daddy, you light-headed woman. Many others look at me disparagingly - for asking them what they are doing at the checkpoint, in the tank, in the jeep, cocking their guns at children and women.

All soldiers, individually, reiterate similar justifications and reasoning for their roles at checkpoints, nightly ambushes, search and arrest operations, killings. They are well-guided, some would say indoctrinated - by their commanding officers, to be able to chant the same mantras. But at the same time, the individual sense of self-importance, of being needed as the essential protector, has been and still is a crucial component of the soldiers' behavior and motivation.

Israeli society fosters the sense of individuality of every soldier.

The society is clearly represented by the parents. And in the eyes of the parents the soldiers remain kids in spite of all the trappings, the rites of passage into adulthood, the erect guns, huge cannons they have learned to move up and down in the midst of curfew-stricken civilian neighborhoods, in spite of the sharp-tipped missiles and bombs they have learned to fire from fighter aircraft. Away from home, the protected, feminine image of a gun is transformed into something totally different: only Palestinian children and parents - and the Lebanese, of course, - are truly exposed to the full-blown, mature nature of those weapons - and to their very concretely dangerous and consummated use.

Israeli members of this age-group - 18, 20, even 25 and 30 year-olds - are nearly always and exclusively referred to as 'kids' when they are soldiers. Take, for example, this letter written by a soldier's mother to the activists of *Machsomwatch* - 'checkpoint watch', a group of several hundred

Israeli women, who, since early 2001, has been monitoring the mushrooming checkpoints and Israel's tightening policy of restrictions of Palestinians' freedom of movement, a group of women that dares challenge male monopoly over definitions of security. Checkpoints in the heart of .Palestinian territory delineate the enclaves, Bantustans, in which Israel engages the Palestinians, and separate them from the Israeli ocean of construction and development that engulfs those densely-populated islands.

Here is the letter, circulated last March: "Soldiers who take a military course with my son have told him how hard it is for them to face the aggressiveness and one-sidedness of *Machsomwatch* women who see only the Palestinians and not at all the Israeli soldiers and the difficult situation in which they find themselves. Many soldiers have been raised in liberal, leftist homes, homes with values, they serve three years and more in the army, and often find themselves in the heart of the conflict, engulfed by hatred, facing 'pregnant' women whose bellies are full with explosives and ambulances carrying terrorists, pretending to be injured, and on the other hand, a miserable population that pays a steep price for indiscriminate terrorism which impacts us all. I do appreciate *Machsomwatch*, but believe it is important to understand that inside the helmet and underneath the bullet-proof vest is a 19-year old kid exposed to the Palestinians' manipulations, the cruelty of the settlers and his commanders' instructions. According to the soldiers, you often show up in the middle of things, not having witnessed how a certain situation started, the young lad- soldier already knows the person who has tried to cheat him in the past, he has already been abused by Palestinians and hit by their stones, and his patience, like his age, is restricted.

"When you treat the Palestinians with sweets do remember that the soldier in front of you has not been on home-leave for over three weeks, he is torn with longing for his girlfriend, his family, normal life, and it is difficult for him to see you showing so much consideration only to the other side. This kid might have a mother who helps Palestinian kids, who has taught him to tell dark from light, and he is hurt by the hostility you show him".

In preserving the soldiers' childlike status, their fragility and vulnerability - parents and society at large individualize them. In order to do so, they need to disarm them from their powerful objective role as occupiers, as well as demonize the Palestinians, as this mother does. The fragile and individual image blurs the fundamentally offensive mission in which the "children" are engaged. It helps solidify the official narrative about Israel being forever under attack, a permanent target, the victim needing protection. The individual identification with every kid-soldier - who potentially risks

his life for the sake of protecting us, adults, and defending the State - strengthens the collective misrepresentation of reality, which, in its turn, backs up official policies of occupation and dispossession.

“We are entitled to defend ourselves and our People” – this is what I often heard from young Palestinians who chose to take up arms, or from people who defended the decision of youngsters to resort to all forms of arms - from stones to guns and missiles and explosive belts, as a form of what they regard as their struggle for liberation. That seems to echo the old Israeli chorus. But a sense of national duty or the drive to “sacrifice” for the general good and for everyone's freedom has never needed conscription laws among colonized peoples. In that sense, Palestinian youngsters have enjoyed much more freedom than their Israeli peers in choosing a path which might lead them to their death, injury, or incarceration. The collective and the individual are merged by the very fact that the regime of occupation and colonization harms and targets every member of the community. Thus, too, the anger: every angry individual represents the entire enraged community. He\she does not need indoctrination or official versions. It is the very foreign, repressive rule itself that socializes people into opposing it.

The interplay of collectively-made individual decisions was tangible especially in the first days and weeks of the Intifada: a prominent “new guard” Fatah leader - who had spent 14 years in Israeli jail for joining a Fatah armed cell in the early 80’s - explained how the phenomenon of shooting “at the sky” became commonplace. Our guys - he was referring mainly to Fatah - tend to imitate each other without giving too much thought to what underlies the act itself. No orders were needed for people with guns in their hands to use them as an expression of their – and everyone else's -fury and frustration. “One was seen shooting, no matter where, another joined in, then some others”. It is not a very flattering description, and some Israeli intelligence reports might suggest that planning and orders were behind them, from the start. But judging by the absence of any earlier military preparation, any kind of training or tactical knowledge and calculation - I am sure that the emulation theory is in place, at least for the initial stages and first days. It is then that the Palestinian leaderships at several levels followed suit: either by not ordering to hold fire, or by indirect and direct encouragement to continue. I could see the emulation process at work: daily funerals of mostly civilians and a few gunmen killed by well-concealed Israeli soldier-kids, allowed Palestinian youngsters to imagine their own venerated death and burial. Each such funeral pushed more youngsters to military checkpoints - with or without stones. It drove others to search for guns. They

all emulated the images – not the content - of other national struggles that delivered: especially that of Hizbulla in Lebanon.

This hollow exhibitionism served the Israeli army well, smoothened its justification for its own policy of persistent escalation: in the count of casualties, scope of ammunition used, many types of heavier weapons such as tanks and combat helicopters, and in the early decision to assassinate Palestinian military activists; first the commanders, later on - more and more junior self-recruited combatants.

The Israeli military spokesperson marveled at the possibility of narrating to the Israeli public the tale of clashes between what was often perceived by laymen as “two almost symmetrical warring armies”. In contrast, many a soldier regarded the Palestinian shooting as pathetic and unprofessional, a sign of poor training or none at all. One such soldier told me that in the early days, his unit, positioned at the outskirts of Jericho, used to practice “mooning”: while the fake battle took place, the soldiers turned their backs to the Palestinian gunmen\policemen, pulled off their pants and underpants, and exhibited their smooth young buttocks - the feminine part of the human body, as Bourdieu says. The part that is invaded, conquered, as the same soldier told me introspectively. He explained more precisely what was behind the move: “When we showed them these (feminine) parts, we were saying: it’s yours, but you with your guns and bullets are not capable of taking it, you are impotent”. With this specific unit the habit was put to a halt when one Israeli officer was killed by Palestinians.

The soldiers justly concluded that with time and experience, their rivals became more proficient, more precise, cautious, motivated to hit and not only to show off. Yet the exhibitionism persisted: for example, contrary to all underground logic, Palestinians are used to immediately give away all incriminating details of almost each and every armed action: the organization, the performers - sometimes even the methods used. This is not serious underground thinking, told me an angry ex-Islamic Jihad activist in Gaza. It was clear from very early on that Palestinian armed groups were busier competing with each other than attempting to outsmart their common enemy.

The very name Fatah chose for its new armed wing rings of competition: The Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. *Kataeb Shuhada Al Aqsa*. First, the stress on Al Aqsa has been Arafat’s tactic since 1996, probably hoping that the religious tint would arouse Arab Muslim states to take a more active part, and convince his own people that he has not forsaken national demands, dressed up in ever more

religious argumentation. I am a believer no less than Hamas, you could hear Arafat - who, together with other members of the Muslim brotherhood, like himself, had founded Fatah 35 years earlier. “Brigades” was a new definition for a Fatah armed group. It took after the much younger Izz-a-Din al Qassam Brigades (Kataeb) of the Hamas: in demonstrations people chanted “*ka-ta-eb, ka-ta-eb*” - in captivating rhythm, which evoked Fatah’s envy.

Martyrs are a novelty of the Oslo years: death has become a goal in itself, something to boast about in the internal competition between the organizations and which proves their determination and dedication to the cause. Not as it used to be in the past - a possible eventuality and sorrowful outcome of the fighting. This is not conscious emulation – as the choice of the title 'brigades' was. This was a slow and persistent infiltration of a religious conviction, that heaven is the 'promised land' for the fighters and earthly death not the end of life, rather the contrary. Death while holding any sort of weapon ensures eternal life - a perverted kind of procreation for a generation that has lost any taste of life.

Still, behind all the exhibitionism and emulation, some planning was bound to develop - mostly inspired, I believe, by the relatively late entry of Hamas into the bloody game (after its absence from demonstration sites cost some of its popularity). This was the direct fruit of the Israeli policy of escalation. On November 8th, 2000 Israel committed its first assassination: Hussein A’beyat, a Fatah activist who the army claimed was responsible for the debutant shootings at Israeli settlers' vehicles and military positions in the Bethlehem area, in which three soldiers were killed. By then, namely 42 days after the onset of the Intifada, Israeli soldiers had already killed 141 Palestinians, most of whom were civilians, 43 of whom were minors, two Palestinian civilians killed by Israeli civilians (colonists). Palestinians killed eight Israeli civilians: six in the OPT, two in Jerusalem. During these 42 days - 5 soldiers were killed – including two who were lynched in full view of international cameras. Until Nov. 2nd, no Palestinian armed wing had crossed the 'green line' – in other words, targeted Israelis inside Israel proper.

The missile that killed Abeyat also killed two women, passing by. Before A’beyat was assassinated by the Israelis, I was told, only few people in the Bethlehem area considered joining the “struggle”. There were only some 50 guns in circulation - as a manner of speech. A few months later, more youngsters joined in and several hundred guns suddenly appeared. Israel then kept intensifying its persecution of what it terms as terrorists. This competitive pattern prevails to this day. The number of civilian protesters diminished, whereas the number of guns and gunmen has been on the rise.

My female habitus concluded that the guys of the two unequal warring sides were engaged in a "whose is bigger..." contest. You throw stones, I hit you with a bullet jerked out from a gun, you move to a Molotov cocktail - I'll show you how long my machinegun is, then the cannon, then the fighter plane dropping bombs. What, then, remains at the disposal of those who possess no fighter planes if not the exploding human body?

Two or three years later Israeli security upper echelons were starting to voice their regrets about their escalation policy. Far too late. I am convinced, though, that it was both an intended policy of escalation and a typical knee-jerk reaction: "We'll show you who's in charge" on the part of Israeli military and political decision-makers.

A dozen or so young Palestinian women joined the suicide bombers, either as accomplices or as perpetrators. It needed some sort of training, a drive to perform and the willingness to transgress traditional gender demarcation lines - in order to share with Palestinian women the most visibly phallic weapon of all, the gun. Obviously, these conditions were lacking in the Second Intifada. The gun, however, proved to be quite small in the hands of Palestinians. Exploding humans served much better the goal of revenge and attaining an afterlife.

Israeli women, though trained to use guns and now more and more even posted as combatants, do not participate in battles per se and do not use those guns as men do. Their growing participation has been more in the back rooms of high-tech warfare: radars, computers, remote control shootings, the separation fence control room. A female soldier commanded the unit of bulldozer operators that ground Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah in April 2002. Judging by the look of their drivers, armored bulldozers, APC's, Hummers and other sci-fi-looking vehicles roaming triumphantly around Palestinian cities and villages and fields provide no less orgiastic winning pleasure.

How typical it is that Palestinian women who were allowed to join the game would choose the most primitive of weapons – the army of human bombs, while their Israeli counterparts were sent to the safer sophisticated, high-tech tip of the cock.

That women do participate in this competition – albeit in smaller numbers - is proof that phallic drive is not a biological instinct but rather a social-historical construct.

Quite a few armed Israeli women are posted at checkpoints, policing the passage of thousands of Palestinians every day. Close observation evokes the disturbing conclusion that very often women-soldiers are ruder towards Palestinians and behave more crassly than men-soldiers do. Just as Arab soldiers – Druze and Bedouins - are often ruder than their Jewish peers, or Ethiopian Jews and Russian immigrants more than the Israeli-born Jews, the *'sabras'*. It's the pleasure of those positioned at the lower rungs of the social hierarchy to wield power over those positioned even lower than themselves. It is their entry pass into the Israeli 'melting pot', or their claim to an imaginary respectability.

Over the years, many Palestinian women resorted to a form of “struggle” other than suicide attacks: they attempted to stab soldiers, thus joining the army of Palestinian legends, sent to jail and returned home as heroines. Without belittling their share of the common fury, it is an open secret, though, that more often than not what motivates these women are harsh conditions at home: domestic violence, incest, abusive male relatives, a marriage arrangement they wish to avoid. The knife – another phallic object – offers some form of rescue from immediate male domination, and is supposed to endow them with the social strength they now lack, as women.

Still, the fact is that not all Palestinian youngsters joined the armed manifestations of anger. Not all men who were on the Palestinian security payroll and had guns actually took part. Not all kids threw stones. Over the years, the Palestinian collective has manifested itself in two parallel paths: the one is their amazing resilience vis-a-vis Israeli repression and brutalization. It was and is practiced by every individual, male and female, turning it into a mass phenomenon. The second path is the externalized support of any so-called military Palestinian action, and the fear to publicly question or debate the logic of the hollow militarization and counter-brutalization of what started as an unarmed civilian outburst of long-brewing rage.

Competitive mentality, with its escalating nature, took reign from the very beginning: political organizations tallied their dead as a proof of their national, patriotic zeal. Then the competition moved to who was better at taking revenge, opening the doors to the suicide attacks against civilians inside Israel proper. Hamas has the upper hand when it comes to the internal competition over “whose is bigger”, but not in the competition with the Israelis.

Israeli military units count their victories and individual successes, by tallying the dead “terrorists”. Israeli top security echelons count Palestinian casualties out loud as if proving efficiency in their

fight against rockets fired at Israel from Gaza. Military spokespersons obscure the fact that many if not most of the casualties are civilians, and the armed ones have mostly been assassinated - not actually killed in battle. When soldiers were killed in several pure guerilla operations, the army unleashed all its primal instincts and set out on some campaigns of sheer revenge, mostly against civilians or Palestinian policemen who stood or even slept harmlessly in their positions. Both in Gaza and the West Bank - thus stating that a Palestinian is always a terrorist: in combat action against heavily armed soldiers no less than when he targets civilians.

Resorting to suicide attacks tactics was a tacit admission that guerilla warfare against the army and armed civilians in the OPT proper is beyond the organizations' skills and endurance. Rockets from Gaza - another logical step in this futile competition - rendered more damage to Palestinians than to Israelis. Two Hamas military activists, in charge of the Qassam rocket unit, replied candidly to my question what was the point, and whether that was the way to liberate Palestine: "We want the Israelis to feel fear, just as our kids and women do" they said 4 years ago. Fear, indeed, has overwhelmed the Israeli communities along the border with Gaza. If that is the goal, then my two interlocutors - if they are still alive - can feel triumphant.

I once sat with a group of Fatah gunmen, "Shuhada Al Aqsa" group - in Nablus, the only city that has remained besieged for the last seven and more years. I was taken to their hiding place in the old city: among other things they claimed that the soldiers are cowards, because the daily military incursions into the city are conducted in tanks. For fear of the guerilla fighters, of course, the young gunmen boasted, though I doubted their guerilla skills. I published my interview with them, and a year or so later was told by the Israeli army's regional commander that he had learned the lesson and ordered not to "enter" Nablus in tanks, but rather with lighter armored vehicles. Here we have an unwritten competition on who is more scared, who less, and thus, who is the braver of the two sides, albeit elevated to a higher rung in the chain of command.

Which brings me back to the exposed buttocks: mooning, that manifestation of scorn, disdain and degradation of the natives - was not a unique, concealed phenomenon in Jericho seven years ago. In a recent incident (January 11th, 2008) international peace activists filmed three soldiers exposing their buttocks to a Palestinian farmer in the southern West Bank. One soldier was filmed raising his fingers in the V sign. The exposure of the buttocks (or rather, the mistake to have been documented) led to a quick military trial of the three and 21 days in prison.

I am reluctant to over-theorize the buttocks: last year, sailing a *bateau-mouche* in Paris, I saw a group of youngsters on the quai exposed their buttocks as well. In that context it was an expression of infantile playfulness. Subjectively speaking, the soldiers' exposed buttocks should not be less or more their individual infantile performance. But in the present context - they mean something entirely different: not merely degradation and belittling, not only boredom and naughtiness or arrogance. In this context in the south of the West Bank, their triumphant male, individual infantilism converges with the on-going territorial and demographic success of the Israeli dominant power in that region – as in others of the occupied West Bank. Not only is the male-soldier the dominant Israeli. The Palestinian is the Woman.

Israeli triumph, slowly conducting the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian South Hebron Hills region, is comprised of those facts:

Israeli colonies thrive; their outposts thrive in spite of all Israeli official promises to dismantle them; colonists and army constantly intimidate and assault Palestinians; Palestinians are not allowed to build, to develop their dwellings, even latrines have been demolished by the authorities; grazing is denied the Palestinians for their sheep and goats; they no longer have any way to access the market in Hebron (regional urban center). Palestinians fear traveling in their own land, and do not have access to a sufficient water supply.

Note this report, of March 30th, written by Christian Peacemaker Team activists: I assure you I did not yet read it fully when I decided to quote it here:

On the morning of 29 March, twenty Israeli settlers from the illegal Israeli settlement outpost Havat Ma'on entered the village of At-Tuwani. Throughout the day, groups of four to five settlers entered the village three additional times. While in the village, settlers harassed Palestinians, twice displaying their buttocks to Palestinians and internationals in the area. Israeli authorities did nothing to move settlers away from the village. Israeli military spoke and joked with settlers when they entered the village, allowing them to stay on land owned by Palestinian residents of At-Tuwani. Palestinians report a military commander threatened to tell the settlers to attack the village after the military left the area.

These incidents were preceded by settler attacks and intimidation on 28 March. In the morning, settlers attacked two Palestinians in the face and eyes with aerosol spray. Later that day, masked settlers drove through the village, shouting insults, and throwing stones at Palestinian children and a woman carrying a baby. The masked settlers retreated into the trees of the illegal settlement outpost of Havat Ma'on, but remained visible until Israeli military arrived.

If from this lecture you have received the impression that I draw parallels and evoke mutual mirror images of Palestinian and Israeli gunmen - I would now like to correct this impression by way of conclusion:

The phallic individual manifestations as expressed by Israeli soldiers are well-gearred and used by the Israeli system of domination over Palestinian lives. The individual complementary sentiments of being attacked, of protecting and self-defense, of competition with the alleged attacker - all fit into the general Israeli strategy, are nourished and empowered by it, and endear it all the more to those who carry it out. This fusion should not confuse us: There is a determined, strategic policy. When needed, it unleashes all expressions of male domination and vulnerability. When necessary, it suppresses them, or uses proxies.

On the other hand, the very same sentiments entertained by Palestinian youngsters - attacked, humiliated, and therefore determined to protect, to avenge their own personal humiliation as well as their community's, to express anger by using all sorts of symbols of their male dominance, to compete - are what dictated a course of Palestinian military gut-reactions, lacking any political cohesiveness, goal or strategy. Here, the momentary sense of individual power and domination and their external, symbolic and phallic appearances are in stark contrast to the political weakness of Palestinians and to the impotence of their leaderships.

All right reserved , Amira Hass

Edited by Tal Haran