

Double standards on Palestinian resistance

Back in 1993, the exchange of letters between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasir Arafat officially began the Oslo era of endless negotiations, expanding Israeli settlements, and a deepening occupation that would eventually destroy any possibility of the two-state solution that those supporting Rabin and Arafat were envisioning.

In his letter to Rabin, Arafat explicitly renounced violent resistance to Israel's occupation. He wrote, "Accordingly, the PLO renounces the use of terrorism and other acts of violence and will assume responsibility over all PLO elements and PLO personnel in order to assure their compliance, prevent violations and discipline violators."

Those words produced an expectation that Palestinians will employ only non-violent means to resist Israel's occupation, dispossession, and apartheid. This idea of restricting violence is directed solely at Palestinians. Israel, being a state and therefore being perceived as having a state's monopoly on violence, is judged by a different standard.

Although in the west the terminology used to defend Israeli violence is almost always couched in terms of self-defence, the idea that Palestinians might also defend themselves is rarely considered in similar terms. Palestinians are

condemned whenever they use violent means, even when throwing rocks at armoured Israeli soldiers. Israel, which employs far more violence and, because of its far greater technical capabilities, has much less excuse for the vastly higher number of civilian and non-combatant casualties it causes, is, at best, criticized for "excessive" use of force.

Israel's claim to self-defence when it uses massive police and military violence is effectively debunked in a 2012 paper by Professor Noura Erakat, currently at Rutgers University. Erakat persuasively argued that "A state cannot simultaneously exercise control over territory it occupies and militarily attack that territory on the claim that it is 'foreign' and poses an exogenous national security threat. In doing precisely that, Israel is asserting rights that may be consistent with colonial domination but simply do not exist under international law."

A decade after Erakat wrote those words, Israel is routinely using military force in daily raids on Palestinian towns and villages; its soldiers are working in tandem with settlers to assault Palestinians and devastate their lives and property and it is continuing the permanent lockdown of many West Bank areas as well as its siege on Gaza in actions that threaten life, limb, and economic devastation to

such an extent that it can't be seen as anything but extreme violence.

None of this is new; they are the characteristics of Israeli oppression of Palestinians and Palestinian resistance to that oppression that has been visible for decades. But the Palestinian response is now entering a new phase.

A new Palestinian armed group, Areen al-Usud (the Lion's Den) has emerged in Palestine. Unaffiliated with any political party, Areen al-Usud has attacked Israeli occupation forces in the West Bank. Other new armed groups, like the Jenin Brigade have also carried out attacks against Israeli forces. The attacks have stirred popular applause and support.

While it's still unclear exactly what this means for the coming weeks and months, the emergence of these groups and the demonstrated public support for them in the West Bank makes it more likely that the question of Palestinian use of violence will once again assume a more prominent place in the discourse around Palestine in the United States and Europe.

The terms of this discussion are stacked against Palestinians before the arguments even begin. A clear example was seen just last week, when US State Department Spokesperson Vedant Patel condemned violence between Israelis and Palestinians, saying that "the deaths of soldiers and children alike are unacceptable."

The obscene equivalence between the killing of an Israeli soldier and that of a Palestinian child is a key component of the framework in which Palestinian resistance is seen by the United States. A Palestinian child is a civilian and is protected from violent conflict by law. An occupying soldier is a combatant. Yet, as we saw recently, Israel treats an on-duty soldier as an innocent victim of what is presented as senseless Palestinian violence.

On October 8, Palestinian fighter Udai Tamimi shot and killed Noa Lazar, an Israeli soldier stationed at a checkpoint near the



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Shu'fat refugee camp in East Jerusalem. Lazar's death is, in my view, a tragedy. Sacrificed on the altar of apartheid, Lazar was sent to the West Bank as part of an occupying army, and, sadly, that means she is unambiguously a target of Palestinian resistance.

That's not some political classification, that is the very essence of international humanitarian law: the principle of distinction, which dictates that legitimate targets are those that are part of the armed forces of a party to a conflict. Calling Tamimi a terrorist for the attack is simply a false definition of an act of combat against a military target. Such tragedies can be easily avoided by ending the regime which denies Palestinians their basic rights, a regime which necessitates the employment of armed forces to enforce the denial of those rights and turns those armed forces into legitimate targets of violence.

The nature of resistance is such that violence gets a lot more attention than non-violence. Indeed, non-violence can be very frustrating and limiting, precisely because it is a form of resistance that often requires that the world pay attention to it. Protesting and resisting with simple steadfastness or civil disobedience often leaves those engaging in it battered, bruised, imprisoned, hospitalized, or even dead, yet there is often no immediate response.

Palestinians have employed non-violence consistently from the very beginning of their conflict with Zionism. As Palestinian-American scholar Yousef Munayyer put it, "The truth is that there is a long, rich history of nonviolent Palestinian resistance dating back well before 1948, when the state of Israel was established atop a depopulated Palestine. It has just never captured the world's attention the way violent acts have."

Yet sometimes non-violent acts of resistance capture the attention of many. When Palestinians pushed for recognition of Palestine as a state by the United Nations and requested non-member status, Israel and the United States noticed and reacted hysterically. Any time the Palestinian Authority has gone to international institutions



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such as the International Court of Justice or the International Criminal Court, the US and Israel have responded apoplectically.

But these attitudes are as nothing compared to the massive campaign against the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, initiated by Palestinian civil society. The enormous energy that Israel and its supporters around the world have exerted to block the efforts of the BDS movement may not have blunted BDS' momentum, but it has sent a very clear message to Palestinians that whether resistance is violent or non-violent makes no difference; it is not the nature of resistance that provokes the violent or political backlash against Palestinians it is resistance itself that does that, whatever the form.

While Americans and Europeans chat and debate with each other about the nuances of Israeli politics, the Israeli government tightens its grip on Palestinians and Palestinians become ever more frustrated, eager for action, and impatient with their leadership and with a world that keeps telling them the time is not yet "ripe" for their rights to be realized.

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Perhaps that is why we are seeing such widespread support for armed resistance. Perhaps it's simply a response to Israel escalating an already violent policy of

apartheid. In any case, armed action seems to be moving into a more prominent role in Palestinian resistance and it will be important for supporters of Palestinian rights to be ready to defend those actions wherever we can.

It's worth recalling the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates in this regard. In 2013, Coates wrote, "even our rhetoric toward freedom movements which employ violence is inconsistent. Mandela and the ANC were 'terrorists.' The Hungarian revolutionaries of 1956, the Northern Alliance opposing the Taliban, the Libyans opposing Gaddafi were 'freedom fighters.'"

We need to remind people how passionate they are about arming Ukraine. Because many of those same people are likely to condemn Palestinians for raising a hand against their oppressors, just as so many of them condemned Mandela decades ago.

So often, these people have asked, "where is the Palestinian Mandela?" Well, when South African Apartheid President P.W. Botha offered Mandela his freedom if he would renounce violence, he replied, "Let him renounce violence. I cannot sell my birthright, nor am I prepared to sell the birthright of the people to be free."

The same holds for the Palestinians.

The use of violence is a tragedy, in all cases. But it is even more tragic to allow it only to an oppressor while forbidding it to the oppressed.

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