

Fear and Violence in Israel

Stan Cohen



"The solution to the problem of terrorism has nothing to do with the solution to the political dispute with the Palestinians."

- Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, March 30, 1993

Soon after the current wave of violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories started—once there were waves and intervals, now every incident merges into the next—a journalist from an American daily paper phoned me. How could he explain current events to his readers? The fear produced by terrorist stabbings in the streets of Israel and the killings of settlers and soldiers in the Occupied Territories; the call by the Police Inspector-General for citizens to be armed; the Prime Minister's plea to high school students to be as coura-

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geous as their parents' generation in standing up to "Arab terror." Were all these actions comparable to the fear of crime in American cities?

At some primal level the comparisons are valid. The jogger stabbed in Jerusalem would have experienced the same moment of fear as a jogger attacked in Central Park. But in Jerusalem, the attacker shouted "*allah al-akhbar*" (Arabic for "God is Great"). At this point, the cases become so obviously different that all comparisons lose their point.

It is not that the violence, despair, and insecurity in the ghettos of America do not have their own political economy. Even the most blinkered of good citizens sense that the problems revealed by the Los Angeles riots are too deeply rooted to be solved by more police patrols. And that "crime in the streets" is a code for "the Black problem." But in Israel, no such deep decoding is needed. The politics of fear and violence are in the open, in "each drop of Jewish blood spilt." Every government

decision, every reaction in the street, every slogan screamed on both sides takes its shape from the bitter and endless Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Israeli Right actually has an interest in exaggerating the political-tactical meaning of the current round of violence. For them, any indication of an Israeli willingness to negotiate and compromise directly causes more violence. Every knife, bullet, and stone is ordered by the Palestinian leadership—PLO or Hamas—as part of a deliberate policy to push Israel into a “fateful unilateral concession.” The answer: Stand fast and wait till they break. In the meantime, “ensure security” through the usual desperate resorts: house demolition, further mass deportations, undercover units hunting down and killing *m’vookashim* (wanted men), curfews, and sieges to seal off Gaza and the West Bank, calls for the death penalty, the open legitimization of lynch mobs.

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The Israeli Left (of what is referred to as “left” here; most are barely liberals) also makes the political connection obvious. “Peace is the Response to Terror” is today’s Peace Now slogan. After a nine-month slumber induced by the Labor-Meretz coalition, Peace Now has woken up to the urgency of the current situation. In major newspaper advertisements on April 1, the movement called on the government “to find the inner strength to take the initiative and break the deadlock in the negotiations.” It sets out a sensible program (establishing an interim autonomy arrangement, easing the conditions of Palestinian lives, ending all Jewish settlement activity) that is a clear response to the right-wing campaign “to topple the government by dancing on the blood of victims.”

The center—that is, Rabin’s Labor coalition and most of the population—deals with the political connection in a more disingenuous way than either the radical Right or the peace movement. Theirs is the Israeli version of the Kissinger “two track” doctrine: bombing in Vietnam and talking in Paris. Thus Rabin’s regular catechism: Pursue peace as if terrorism did not exist; fight terrorism as if the peace talks were not happening. Decent people everywhere are attracted to this grotesque bad faith. It is based on two illusions. First, that the current Israeli position (wholly supported by the Clinton administration) offers

the Palestinians much more than the occupation in another name. Second, that the continued violation of Palestinian rights does not produce even further resistance to a settlement.

In a curious way, all sides share a political discourse that underplays the reactive nature of Palestinian violence. By overemphasizing “politics” in the sense of peace and diplomacy, the cumulative daily effect of the occupation is elided from memory.

The knife-wielding Palestinian from the refugee camp in Gaza is not a mere puppet operated from Tunis or Teheran. Nor is he a criminal. His despair is not an unfortunate by-product but the deliberate result of Israeli policy. He has been humiliated at a hundred road blocks and check-points; someone in his family has been shot, beaten, or arrested. His intent to kill any Israeli Jew in the street—and the religious fanaticism that justifies this—comes from an experience that rational politics misses.

Most Israelis dimly recognize this fundamental truth. Even army generals appear on television to explain patiently that no military action can touch the conditions in Gaza that breed violence and terror. But the same generals talk about such “conditions” as if they somehow just happened, as if the twenty-seven-year Israeli military occupation had no responsibility for them. In the three months in which seventeen Israeli citizens have been killed, some fifty-six Palestinians have also been killed. The dominant agent of violence has always been the authorities.

And one event from recent history has been wholly lobotomized from Israeli consciousness: the December 1992 mass deportation of 415 Palestinians—an event that marked a new epoch in Israeli political culture. In place of individual punishment, the government introduced a collective threat to the entire Palestinian population, a revival of their worst nightmares from 1948. No one—least of all, the Meretz leadership—openly makes any causal connections between the deportations and the subsequent despair at the diplomatic and daily level. And no one asks what (if the collective punishment of 415 people for seven Israeli deaths so obviously failed as a deterrent) would be the “appropriate” level of response to the far greater violence two months later.

Meanwhile, the fear and violence escalate. Some escalations will be dramatic—pogroms by the settlers—but more important are the incremental effects on the quality of life. Yesterday, driving home down an ordinary Jerusalem street, I noticed a fourteen-year-old boy wearing a *kippa* walking quietly on the sidewalk, the type of kid I think of as a member of the Kach Little League Baseball Club. Probably on his way to a demonstration, he nonchalantly balanced on his shoulder a sign that read “Death to Arabs.” No one appeared to care. □