

Israel Can't Force-feed Occupation to those who Hunger for Freedom

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For more than a month Israel sought to wriggle off a hook that should have snared it from the start. Two children, 17 and 16, were shot dead during Nakba Day protests near Ramallah, in which youths threw stones ineffectually at well-protected and distant Israeli military position.

Hundreds of Palestinian children have lost their lives over the years at the end of a sharpshooter's sights, but the deaths of Nadim Nuwara and Mohammed Abu Al Thahir in Beitunia were not easily forgotten. Israel was quickly cornered by an accumulation of physical and visual evidence.

Israel's usual denials – the deaths were faked, video footage was doctored, Israeli soldiers were not responsible, the youths provoked the soldiers, no live ammunition was used – have been discredited one by one. Slowly Israel conceded responsibility, if only by falling into a grudging silence.

A CCTV camera mounted on the outer wall of a carpentry shop provided the most damning evidence: it captured the moments when the two unarmed boys were each hit with a live round, in one case as the youth can be seen walking away from the protest area.

But rather than come to terms with the world as it now is, Israel wants to preserve the way it once was. It believes that through force of will it can keep the tide of accountability at bay in the occupied territories.

There has been no admission of guilt, no search for the guilty soldiers and no reassessment of its policies on crowd control or the use of live fire – let alone on the continuation of the occupation. Instead, 20 soldiers arrived last week at the store in Beitunia, threatened to burn it down, arrested the owner, Fakher Zayed, and ordered he remove the camera that caused so much embarrassment.

According to Israel, the fault lies not with a society where teenage soldiers can choose to swat a Palestinian child as casually as a fly. The problem is with a Palestinian storekeeper, who assumed he could join the modern world.

The nostalgia for a “golden era” of occupation was evident, too, last week in a policy change. Israel has rounded up hundreds of Palestinians in the hunt for three Israeli teenagers missing since June 12. Palestinian cities like Hebron have been under lockdown for days, and several Palestinians youths killed, while soldiers scour the West Bank.

But with the search proving fruitless, Israel's attorney general approved the reintroduction of the notorious “ticking bomb” procedure.

In doing so, he turned the clock back 15 years to a time when Israel routinely used torture against prisoners. Israel may not have been alone then in using torture, but it was exceptional in flaunting its torture dungeons alongside claims to democratic conduct.

Only in 1999 did the country's supreme court severely limit the practice, allowing interrogators one exemption – a suspect could be tortured only if he was a ticking bomb, hiding information of an attack whose immediate extraction could save lives.

Now Israel's law chief has agreed that the Palestinian politicians, journalists and activists swept up in the latest mass arrests will be treated as "ticking bombs". Israel's torture cells are back in business.

Israelis have been lulled into a false sense of security by the promise of endless and simple technical solutions to the ever-mounting problems caused by the occupation.

This week, Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, hoped to find another "fix" for Palestinians who refuse to remain supine in the face of their oppression.

Netanyahu is racing through a law to force-feed more than 100 Palestinian prisoners who are two months' into a hunger strike. The inmates demand that Israel end the common practice of holding prisoners for months and sometimes years without charge, in what is blandly termed "administrative detention".

Such prisoners, ignorant of their offence, are unable to mount a defence. And as it becomes ever clearer to Palestinian society that Israel is never going to concede Palestinian statehood, things that were once barely tolerated are now seen as unendurable.

Last week, the heads of the World Medical Association urged Israel to halt the legislation, which in a double bill of compulsion will require doctors to sedate and force-feed prisoners to break their hunger strike.

The WMA called the practice "tantamount to torture". The legislation violates not only the autonomy of the prisoners but the oaths taken by the doctors to work for their patients' benefit.

The liberal Haaretz newspaper warned that Israel was rushing headlong towards "a new abyss in terms of human rights violations". And all this to prevent reality pricking the Israeli conscience: that Palestinians would rather risk death than endure the constant indignities of a life under belligerent occupation.

Israelis have yet to realise the dam is soon to burst. They still believe a technical fix is the way to solve ethical dilemmas continuously thrown up by the longest occupation in modern times.

Israel's technical solutions work to an extent. They confine Palestinians to ever smaller spaces: the prison of Gaza, the city under lockdown, the torture cell, or the doctor's surgery where a feeding tube can be inserted.

But the craving for self-determination and dignity are more than technical problems. You cannot force-feed a people to still their hunger for freedom.

Belligerent occupations – especially ones where no hope or end is in sight – engender evermore creative and costly forms of resistance, as the hunger strike demonstrates. A physical act of resistance can be temporarily foiled. But the spirit behind it cannot be so easily subdued.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

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