

Israel and the Weaponisation of Empathy

Selective empathy is not empathetic at all.

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Global Research, October 18, 2023

[Al Jazeera](#) 15 October 2023

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

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On October 9, two days into the current [Israel-Hamas war](#) – in which the Israeli army appears intent on semi-obliterating the Gaza Strip – the website of the New York-based magazine Women's Health published some guidelines on "How To Cope With The Trauma Of Violent Images And Videos Of Hamas' Attack on Israel".

It is unsurprising, of course, that the potential for trauma has been detected solely as a reaction to Hamas's surprise attack on Israel and not to, say, the past 75 years of Israeli violence and ethnic cleansing of Palestine – the cumulative depraved barbarity of which is what prompted Hamas's actions in the first place.

After all, Israel's carefully crafted monopoly on victimisation and the attendant dehumanisation of Palestinians means that footage of the ongoing [Israeli terrorisation of Gaza](#) has never compelled US media outlets to prescribe "steps to protect your mental health".

And yet the Women's Health intervention constitutes a novel sort of twist on the victimisation theme, in which even the vicarious trauma that is allegedly intermittently experienced by US audiences trumps the unmitigated trauma suffered by the people upon whom Israel wages perpetual war.

The article quotes a clinical psychologist in New York on why it can be so upsetting to encounter violent images in one's social media feed: "We're empathetic people. We can picture ourselves in someone else's shoes."

But selective empathy is not empathetic at all. This is particularly the case when "empathy" for Israel happens to be so politically expedient in terms of justifying obscene quantities of US military aid to that country and the slaughter of folks whose existence complicates the US-Israeli vision of the world.

In the United States, my estranged homeland, the very emotion of empathy has been under sustained assault by a [politico-economic system](#) that thrives on alienation and the eradication of communal bonds. When empathy can be weaponised, however, leaders from across what passes as a political spectrum in the US come out in droves to “stand with Israel”.

To be sure, the Israeli monopoly on victimisation defies logic and reality – and casting the state of Israel in the role of pre-eminent victim is a bit like granting the status of victimhood to an assault rifle.

Recall that the foundational episode of the whole “Israeli-Palestinian conflict” consisted of [Israel’s violent self-invention on Palestinian land](#) in 1948, which entailed the destruction of some 530 Palestinian villages, the killing of 15,000 Palestinians, and the expulsion of three-quarters of a million more.

And the bloody pattern has only continued since, with Palestinians consistently dying in disproportionate numbers even while being cast as the aggressors and victimisers. Take Operation Protective Edge in 2014, when the Israeli army killed 2,251 people in the Gaza Strip in 50 days, including 299 women and 551 children. Six Israeli civilians were killed and 67 soldiers.

In Operation Pillar of Defence in November 2012, the Israeli army killed 167 Palestinians while suffering six fatalities in return. In [Operation Cast Lead](#), which Israel launched in Gaza at the end of 2008, more than 1,400 Palestinians were killed, primarily civilians. Among them were 400 children. Three Israeli civilians were also killed along with 10 soldiers.

After the 2012 Israeli assault on Gaza, Israeli journalist Gideon Levy took to the pages of the Haaretz newspaper to remind readers that, “since the first Qassam rocket fell on Israel in April 2001, 59 Israelis have been killed – and 4,717 Palestinians.” Noting that this proportion was “horrifying”, Levy ventured that “it ought to disturb every Israeli”.

Of course, “ought” is still the operative word. But to be “disturbed” by the horrifying context in which Palestinians have now existed for more than seven and a half decades would require empathy – which would in turn require an acknowledgement of Palestinian humanity, rather than the propagation of a pernicious US-backed narrative affirming the infinitely superior value of Israeli over Palestinian life.

Also highly disturbing is that, while this narrative dehumanises Palestinians to the point of effectively denying them the right to emotional and psychological suffering, Israel plays up its emotional casualties as a means of garnering additional empathy.

Following Operation Cast Lead, for example, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs [broadcast](#) a total of 770 Israeli casualties, of which no fewer than 584 were victims of “shock and anxiety syndrome”.

Similarly, following the 34-day Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006 that killed some 1,200 people in that country, the Israeli Health Ministry reported that out of the 4,262 Israeli civilians who had been “treated in hospitals for injuries” a full 2,773 were suffering from “shock and anxiety”.

While the Israeli state’s obsession with air raid sirens and apocalyptic discourse is no doubt

useful in helping to generate general anxiety, a tally of “shock and anxiety” victims in the Gaza Strip would presumably produce a number in the vicinity of 2.3 million, the current population of the Palestinian enclave.

As former Oxfam spokesman Karl Schembri once mused:

“How can you talk about post-traumatic stress interventions in Gaza when people are still in a constant state of trauma?”

Constant anguish has been ensured by all manner of external stimuli, including the asphyxiating Israeli siege of Gaza, regular Israeli massacres, the pulverisation of apartment buildings and neighbourhoods, and the use of drones and [sonic booms](#) to obliterate any potential for even a moment of peace.

Now, as the Israeli army goes about carpet-bombing Gaza and a horrifying amount of blood remains to be spilled, “empathy” remains firmly entrenched in Israel’s arsenal – and it is a deadly weapon indeed.

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