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Killing Hope in Beit Hanoun

"Wipe out entire families, devastate communities, send an entire nation into a perpetual state of grief, loss & despair."

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“God is greater than Israel and America,” was the echoing cry of tens of thousands of Palestinians, who descended into the graveyard in grief stricken Beit Hanoun, in the northern Gaza Strip. They congregated in yet another familiar scene to bury their loved ones, killed by Israel’s brutal war against the Palestinians.

This time, the loss was too great to bear, even by the standards of the people of Gaza: eighteen ambulances lined up, carrying the mutilated bodies of eighteen members of the same extended family, the majority of whom were women and children; all civilians.

“I will avenge; I will avenge,” screamed a relative of one of those who died in the Israeli artillery attack on Beit Hanoun, on November 8.

A man initiated the burial ceremony by stepping forward carrying the lifeless body of his one-year-old baby. The tough posture Gaza’s men often wish to exhibit was overshadowed by incomprehensive grief; relatives and friends were collapsing in droves; others reached to the sky, in despair.

Only God could hear them now. Two more tiny bodies swaddled in white made their way through the crowd; more followed.

The total number of those killed in the Israeli bombing of the civilian neighborhood rose to 20, adding to over 50 others killed earlier in the same Israeli military assault dubbed “Clouds of Autumn”, which converged mainly on Beit Hanoun. The latest two figures are to be included in the overall count of 350 Palestinians killed since last June, in the wider military operation carried out in Gaza and dubbed “Summer Rains”.

The numbers are devastating, but the devastation takes on a new dimension when the limbless, maimed, injured, homeless and the forever scarred are factored in. Not that those spared such classifications are better off; since Israel laid its military siege on Gaza — preceded and further cemented by an international economic and diplomatic boycott against the Palestinians and their elected government — Gaza’s misery grows perpetually.

First came the darkness — after the Israeli army bombed the strip’s primary power generator — then, poverty augmented, following the intricate plot to impoverish, thus topple the government (Israel refused to hand over tax revenues it collected on behalf of the Palestinian government, denying civil servants their salaries, thus crippling the economy of the occupied territories).

Then the water got polluted, because of the electric shortage. Hospitals and all other public institutions were left in a state of near collapse; naturally, internal chaos prevailed, thanks in part to rogue Palestinian elements. Then there was Beit Hanoun, another black spot on the collective memory of this nation already overwhelmed by most tragic occasions.

This latest episode, like the others before it, came courtesy of Defense Minister Amir Peretz — although the weapons technology is courtesy of our ever-generous US government — the rising star of Israel's militancy. He pledged months ago to show his critics what sort of a tough man he was. The "leftist" media in Israel tried to sell him to the public as a populist leader with "socialist" tendencies — can Israel's ideological classification be any more bizarre? Now even right-wing media and politicians are cheering Peretz's terror.

Israel's deputy defense minister, Ephraim Sneh, told The Jerusalem Post that the "moral responsibility" for the deaths rested with Palestinian militants who were "cynically using their civilian population as human shields for terrorist activity", reported Reuters; it also quoted the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, Dan Gillerman, as saying that the attack hardly represented a "watershed moment (for) war is a dirty business and during war ugly things happen".

Strange that the leaders of a state that lives beyond the fringes of morality and law still speak as if they indeed possessed moral superiority. Even stranger how such wicked disregard for human life is skimmed over in Western media, without the mocking language that often accompanies ridiculous statements often made by war criminals who defend their crimes as moral and human imperatives.

While some Israeli commentators had the courage to recognize the horror put forth by their malicious army, Ben Caspit was hardly one of them. He equated Gaza's homemade rockets — which produced few injuries in many months — with his country's barbaric "response".

"Every other method has been tried, and failed. With scoundrels you behave like a scoundrel, and with murderous, bloodthirsty terrorism that wants to wipe you off the map, you have to respond accordingly: wipe it out."

And with it, wipe out entire families, devastate whole communities, send a whole nation into a perpetual state of grief, loss and despair.

What does the state of Israel hope to achieve from all this? After sixty years of Palestinian revolt against dispossession and occupation, does Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his henchmen expect the Palestinians to raise the white flag of surrender? Haven't they seen the ever-flowing footage of Palestinians burying their dead? Haven't they read the defiance, the tenacity in the faces of the living?

"I lost my whole family; is there anyone who is still alive? Anyone?" screamed a Palestinian mother from Beit Hanoun as she fell in the arms of her neighbor.

"My husband, my sister, my children, my mother …," she counted what seemed like an endless list, but "I swear in the name of God, we will not surrender; this is our land and here we shall live and die."

But history offers no lesson to Israel; it shall remain isolated in its antiquated, ideologically racist, and inherently theological ideals, operating outside law and morality. But then there should be no surprises when more crude rockets burn their way towards Israel, when many

more hideous suicide bombings detonate in crowded Israeli streets, creating further suffering. For, Israel's insistence on living by the sword will continue to create the perfect environment for violence to prevail, for innocent people to die, and for people to lose everything, even their will to live.

-Ramzy Baroud's latest book: The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle (Pluto Press, London) is now available in the US from the University of Michigan Press and from Amazon.com.

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