

# On Humiliation, and Gaza's Dying Children

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A six-year-old Palestinian girl from Gaza was killed by Israeli fire on 12 June. "Medics say the girl was decapitated by a [tank] shell," Associated Press (AP) reported the next day. The Israeli military said the soldiers opened fire in retaliation against "militants launching rockets into Israel". AP dispassionately elaborated that, "Gaza militants fire rockets and mortars into Israel almost daily." The story of a few lines ended with another corroboration of the claims made by the Israeli military: "The shelling occurred near the border where militants fired 30 rockets into Israel on Tuesday."

This is not another tirade about dehumanising media reporting in which the death of innocent Palestinians is so often blamed, one way or another, on the "militants". Neither is the evoking of this freshest tragedy — the child victim is later named Hadeel Al-Smeiri — intended to underscore the daily crimes committed by the Israeli military against Palestinians in the occupied territories, crimes that largely go unnoticed, buried in the not-so-important news items, nor to accentuate cold-hearted assertion that the Palestinians are to blame for forcing Israel to carry out such tragic "acts of retaliation".

The story struck me as significant beyond its value in attempting to analyse mainstream reporting or the way it highlights the callousness required to defend the decapitation of a six year-old as necessary retaliation. For equally disturbing is the fact that Palestinian factions fail to see in Hadeel's death a compelling argument for unity: rather, they carry on with their political sparring as if they have the luxury of endless time while helpless Palestinians are victimised daily, an ordeal that is followed by no serious repercussions save the firing of useless rockets that fuel yet more Israeli retaliation, thus justifying the slow genocide and the starvation of the imprisoned Palestinians of Gaza.

Some Palestinians, especially those in Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas's camp, are still struggling with their sense of priorities.

The BBC's Jeremy Bowen wrote on 11 June: "The humiliation of June 2007 [when Hamas took over Gaza] will not easily be forgotten by Fatah's people. For the last 12 months the suggestion that they should try to end their argument with Hamas has been guaranteed to get a testy response from senior figures close to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas... One of his senior ministers exploded with such fury whenever I asked him about it that his voice sent the dials on the BBC's recording equipment hurtling into the red."

Reading the above I wondered if the minister would respond with such intensity if Bowen sought his views on the murder of Hadeel or on the fact that the minister's own people are caged, not only in Gaza, but large parts of the West Bank, behind Israeli military barricades, electric fences and security walls?

If the minister fails to appreciate the misery of Hadeel's generation, maybe he should take a few minutes away from his busy schedule to browse some of the grim data on the daily victimisation of Palestinian children. Sigrid Kaag, UNICEF's regional director for the Middle East and North Africa, visited the Jabaliya refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip on 9 June. The poorest of Gaza's slums, it is where the uprising of 1987, unsurprisingly, broke out. "To witness the impact of the current blockade on the children of Gaza firsthand was a daunting experience," Kaag said. "This situation must end."

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "as of 26 May, 64 children had been killed in the conflict since the beginning of the year — more than the total child death toll for all of 2007. Fifty-nine of the deaths were in Gaza and another four victims were Israeli children."

Bowen wrote: "The fighter who emptied his Kalashnikov into the desk of Mohamed Dahlan, until that day the Fatah strongman in Gaza, yelled 'this is the fate of traitors like the scumbag Dahlan' as he pulled the trigger, and it was recorded and put on television for all to see." The minister finds it difficult to forgive such an action by Hamas, conveniently forgetting reports in the US media — Vanity Fair to be more precise — that Dahlan headed a US-Israeli plot to carry out a military onslaught against the democratically elected government in Gaza. The plan was botched because of Hamas's pre-emptive take-over of the Strip.

Consider this: UNICEF reports that, "across the West Bank some 600 obstacles to movement — and the barrier separating the West Bank from Israel — make it difficult for children to attend schools, patients to go to health centres and families to see each other... the closure regime is tightening even for UN humanitarian operations".

Yet the minister, and many like him, find Hamas's violence in June 2007 the pinnacle of humiliation. Puzzling, indeed.

What is more humiliating, I wonder: the sight of Dahlan's office chair filled with bullet holes, or Palestinian mothers, elders and children lining up before an abusive group of trigger-happy Israeli soldiers, jeering in broken Arabic every racist word they can conjure.

Meanwhile, recent news reports spoke of assurances made by Abbas to the anxious Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that his offer of dialogue with Hamas would be conditional. Why condition talks among brethren while allowing Israel endless benefit of the doubt in stretching out a meaningless "peace process" while allowing its army to kill children like Hadeel at will?

Perhaps Abbas, and the angry minister in the BBC report, are confused about the Palestinian state Israel tirelessly promises. "The future Palestinian state must be established according to Israel's security needs, including supervision of border crossings and the disarming of militants," reported Haaretz, referring to comments made by Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. So much for sovereignty.

The Israeli paper went on to report: "Israel says it intends to keep major settlement blocs in the West Bank under any future peace deal with the Palestinians and that its network of roadblocks and checkpoints in the West Bank helps to prevent attacks on Israelis."

Even if the Israeli promise of statehood ever actualises it has apartheid written all over it.

Palestinians need not pay much attention to Livni's futile visions. They should focus their energies on unifying their ranks for nothing compels more fury than their disunity, and nothing is as humiliating as their reliance on Israeli and US arms and money to keep their own brethren in Gaza starved and browbeaten.

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