



THE TRAGEDY OF THE PALESTINIANS

By Hussein Ibish



Hussein Ibish is a Senior Resident Scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

This essay is a "companion essay" to Asher Susser's ["Violence in Jerusalem – and Israel's Options,"](#) which we posted on October 23, 2015.

The current surge of violence among Palestinians in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 is highly unusual in many respects. It is demographically heavily concentrated among youths, primarily aged 13-16, and geographically concentrated in East Jerusalem. It is largely leaderless and appears to be mostly spontaneous actions of individual rage. If there is an organizing force of any kind, it appears to be social media such as Twitter and Whatsapp, through which these youths communicate on their mobile phones. But this is hardly a strong structuring or guiding factor. Those such as Hamas and extremist religious preachers who have been attempting to take advantage of the situation and stoke the flames of rage demonstrate all the hallmarks of opportunists seeking to latch onto an existing phenomenon. The notion that they are genuinely inspiring, let alone driving or directing, the violence is almost certainly wrong. And they don't appear to have directly benefited socially or politically from the unrest, at least thus far.

Many have suggested that there is a link to anger over holy places, given that East Jerusalem is such a focal point of the upsurge in attacks. This is plausible, but far from certain. Because the nature of the attacks are "lone wolf" stabbings of random Jewish Israelis, there is an entirely different explanation for the focus on East Jerusalem. It is the one place in the occupied territories where Palestinians living under military rule and Jewish Israelis mix freely and readily. Compared to most other cities in the world, Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem is radically segregated, as well as separate and unequal to a remarkable degree. But compared to the rest of the occupied West Bank, and particularly the Palestinian population centers in "Area A," Arabs and Jews interact regularly in East Jerusalem, certainly to an extent unheard of in, for example, Ramallah. Therefore the random stabbings in Jerusalem may well reflect greater opportunity, as well as a stronger sense of the Israeli presence generally.

This distinction between East Jerusalem and "Area A" also reveals much about the nature of Palestinian anger. "Area A" refers to the self-administered Palestinian areas established by the Oslo agreements in 1993, under the control of a five-year transitional ruling body known as the "Palestinian Authority" (PA). The five-year transitional period has become permanent since 1993, given that 1998 passed by without so much as a whimper. With a few minor adjustments, the opening salvo of the Oslo adjustment to occupation in practice proved to be not the beginning of an end to Israeli rule, but rather the start of Palestinians policing themselves in their own population centers on behalf of Israel and its ongoing settlement program. Palestinians did not achieve the independence they expected to follow the Oslo agreements in 1993, and which they believed had been set in motion through those arrangements. Instead they have found themselves caught in a situation in which, except for East Jerusalem, they are stuck living under the direct rule of a discredited local Palestinian leadership and the broader control of Israel's military with no end in sight.

It is precisely this feeling of total stagnation that seems to be driving the rage being expressed in the stabbing attacks. Palestinians are not by nature nihilistic. But Palestinian youths, and much of the rest of society, are experiencing a nihilistic

moment, in which they do not believe in or identify with much of anything beyond the immediate nuclear family, because there really is nothing for them to latch on to, politically or socially. The PA, and its elderly and decrepit leader Mahmoud Abbas, has lost all credibility with ordinary Palestinians. It is seen as corrupt, ineffective and as representing a diplomatic and political approach to national liberation and independence that is a complete failure. Negotiations with Israel have proven totally fruitless, and the current Israeli government under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is universally regarded by Palestinians as openly hostile to peace based on a two-state solution. Mr. Netanyahu's comments during the last Israeli election are seen as definitive and reflective of Israel's real policies, which completely reject the idea of Palestinian statehood. Mr. Netanyahu's appointment of the extremist settler and annexationist leader Danny Danon to represent Israel at the United Nations is regarded as further confirmation that Israel absolutely rejects the prospect of living in peace with an independent Palestine. Mr. Netanyahu's protestations that he is prepared to negotiate at any time, without preconditions, and that he is still committed to a two-state solution have virtually no credibility among any Palestinian constituency whatsoever.

The collapse of the diplomatic horizon regarding peace talks with Israel is compounded by the widespread realization among Palestinians that Mr. Abbas' "alternative" approach of initiatives at multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court is a similar dead end. Palestinians have seen enough speeches and document signings reflective of this approach that have produced no changes whatsoever on the ground to understand this is not a viable alternative for realizing their national and political rights. Moreover, the tragic collapse of the state and institution building program led by former Prime Minister Salam Fayyad destroyed the once-promising parallel track of developing institutions, governing frameworks and economic structures of an independent state, in spite of the occupation and in order to end the occupation. The amazingly shortsighted Israeli and Western response to Palestinian multilateral initiatives by attacking the PA budget and destroying Mr. Fayyad's ability to not only pay for his programs but even meet payroll and ruining his credibility as an interlocutor with international donors allowed Fatah cadres and other Palestinian rivals to do away with this annoying reformer and his effective but independent policies.

Indeed, the Israeli and Western attack against Mr Fayyad in a misguided effort to lash out against Palestinian multilateral initiatives, which he ironically was virtually alone in questioning, reflects a consistent failure to consider the impact of their own policies on Palestinian politics and political culture. So does the current wave of unrest. The present upsurge in violence is a tragic and misguided, but also virtually inevitable, response to the new Palestinian generation's inability to find anything with which it can identify, or through which it can express its political and national identity. All of their potential ideals have been suppressed, trivialized or made into a mockery by either their own failed leadership, or the continued occupation and total lack of any political or diplomatic horizon for ending it. Young Palestinians also find nothing to believe in from Hamas or other extremist groups. Their policies offer nothing but the greater suffering that is readily evident in Gaza, and their rhetoric similarly fails to strike a chord, except perhaps in terms of raw rage and violence. But there is no evidence that such organizations are benefiting in any meaningful sense from the current spasm of violence, and every reason to see them as equally, or perhaps even more, discredited among young Palestinians.

The messages to ordinary Palestinians from all quarters fuels this anger and despair. Israel's unmistakable message is: "You are defeated and subjugated, now accept your lot." Palestinian political leaders are all seen as essentially saying: "We are your champions, but we have absolutely no idea about how to advance your interests, promote your cause or gain your independence." The West, and the international community generally, seems to be saying: "We'll get back to you as soon as Israel seems to be interested in peace again, now in the meanwhile here are some kind words and limited aid." And, significantly, the Arab world has no clear message for the Palestinians, since it is completely wrapped up in more immediate crises such as the wars in Syria, Libya and Iraq, and the rise of the "Islamic State" terrorist movement. Palestinians, like all Arabs, get their international political information mainly from pan-Arab TV news channels like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. Therefore they have a keen sense of the extent to which their issues are very much on the Arab back burner, and to which they have lost the attention of even their most ardent champions. The sense of isolation, hopelessness, abandonment and despair can hardly be overstated.

This is the immediate context for the surge in violence, which is also being powerfully fueled by violent repression from Israeli occupation forces and even more violent attacks by fanatical Jewish settlers. So that on top of the existential crisis facing Palestinian political identity comes a cycle of tit-for-tat retaliation with settlers, and to some extent even the Israeli military, that further fuels the flames of rage. Without having read, or almost certainly even heard of, Frantz Fanon or his still-relevant essay "Concerning Violence," the knife-wielding *shabab* of East Jerusalem do seem to be channeling his notion that, "At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect." This would certainly seem to be the de facto answer that the violence posits to the despair and defeat-inducing messages coming from the quarters listed in the previous paragraph.

Of course it is a tragic illusion. No people's history better illustrates the self-defeating and counterproductive effects of violence, whether collective or individual, random or systematic, than the modern Palestinian experience. Defeat after defeat -- beginning with the uprising against the British in the mid-30s and running straight through the Gaza wars of recent years -- has been the only real legacy of lashing out. And yet, because of the psychic truth in Fanon's terrifying formulations, when young individuals see no plausible alternatives and have nothing with which they can identify, or through which they can channel their most basic existential and political needs, violence becomes all-but unavoidable. Violence defines the Palestinian reality. Israel's occupation is inherently a system of violence, and not just because it is a structure of dominance and military rule over millions of disenfranchised non-citizens. It also facilitates and enforces the ongoing settlement project, which lies at the heart of the occupation, and which relies on the constant reality and threat of brute force. Try imagining a nonviolent settlement program in which persuasion is used to convince Palestinians to voluntarily abandon their property, and individual or communal lands, and hand them over to recent arrivals from Brooklyn, Latvia or Ethiopia. The absurdity of such a scenario readily demonstrates the violence that lies behind the settlement project, as directly expressed daily in the checkpoints and other systems of surveillance, discipline and control which defines the lives of Palestinians, including in East Jerusalem.

The greatest tragedy is that to the youths who are lashing out, the fact that they do so in vain, or are even engaged in a self-defeating project, is almost certainly virtually irrelevant. The psychic logic articulated by Fanon trumps these irrefutable arguments, especially for a new generation of youngsters in East Jerusalem, surrounded and totally suffocated by the occupation. This is a nihilistic moment in which individualized violence against random Israelis as a form of self-assertion becomes more important than the reality that such actions are not only politically and morally indefensible, but also counterproductive to anything constructive. The terrible reality of occupation with no end in sight, and with absolutely no plausible or even implausible framework or horizon for ending it, virtually mandates the emergence of a terrifying "new normal" between Israelis and Palestinians. In those places where they interact daily and routinely, such as East Jerusalem, this almost certainly means the constant threat of individualized and random violence by Palestinians in response to the collectivized and systematic violence of the Israeli occupation. Only a change in the fundamental reality of occupation, an alteration of the basic terms through which the occupiers and the occupied, the dominant and the subjugated, are presently interacting, or the sudden and unexpected emergence of a new political horizon, is likely to succeed in avoiding the routinization of this new and tragic "normal" between Jewish Israelis and the Palestinians living under their control.