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MAGAZINE

'WE'RE NOT YOUR TOY'

HAS THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE BEEN HIJACKED BY WESTERNERS USING IT FOR THEIR OWN INTERESTS – AND ARE THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE TIRING OF IT?





A WOMAN holds a stuffed bear, covered in fake blood, and a Palestinian flag to protest the 'Tel Aviv on Seine' event on an artificial sand beach in Paris on August 13, 2015. Leftist critics branded the event 'indecent' following an arson attack on a Palestinian family's home in the West Bank village of Duma by Jewish suspects. (Reuters)

Are Palestinians ready to tell 'supporters': 'WE'RE NOT YOUR TOY'

The ultimate adversary of Palestinians may not be Israel, but those in Europe and around the world who have hijacked the Palestinian cause

• GOL KALEV

Melissa Mann, who has volunteered in progressive American organizations such as Standing Up for Racial Justice, was in Israel during the May 14 Gaza riots. When she posted on Facebook that the situation is complex, she got scolded by her progressive colleagues.

One response read: "Israeli apartheid is part of this long history of white supremacy that needs to end." The post went on to discuss black feminism, intersectionality and abolition of prisons, and linked it to today's struggle: "From Ferguson to Palestine" (referring to the contentious shooting by police of African-American Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri).

Many supporters view the Palestinian cause as just one arena in bigger wars that they themselves are fighting for. That includes, among others, the war on imperialism, sexism, racism, colonialism, Americanism and Judaism. As long as the outsiders' interests were aligned with that of the Palestinians, such support was generally welcomed. But it is becoming increasingly evident that some of those who adopt the Palestinian cause are inflicting damage.

Many of those outsiders aggressively promote a narrative of victimhood while suppressing Palestinian progress, prosperity and creativity. The Palestinian cause can only be of use if Palestinians stay miserable and continue to suffer. A primary vehicle outsiders use is advocating for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel, which given economic realities is more damaging to Palestinians than it is to Israelis. In addition, outsiders instill radical messages and help perpetuate and escalate the conflict.

In pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Europe, the Palestinian flag is often displayed alongside communist banners, Hezbollah flags and signs for various revolutionary movements. European demonstrators sometimes hold signs that would make some Palestinians uncomfortable. Most popular amongst them in recent years: "Stop the Genocide in Palestine."

The increasing fashion to use the term genocide to describe Israeli treatment of Palestinians has been broadly adopted in the West for various causes, such as the fight against police brutality and racism. Indeed, Black Lives Matter has argued in its platform that the US is complicit in the "genocide taking place against the Palestinian people."

Mann shares that in volunteering with progressive organizations in the US, there is a clear expectation not only to be pro-Palestinian, but also pro-BDS: "If someone mentions a nuance in applying apartheid and colonialist arguments to Israel, that person would be attacked. It would not be a debate, but an attack on that person's character."

The hijacking of the Palestinian cause by more radical outsiders is not new. In the 20th century, Arab dictators justified their own rule in the name of fighting for Palestine. But since then, many of those Arab countries' attitudes toward Israel have changed and they are now cooperating with Israel on a range of security and economic issues.

BUT THE Palestinians have been "drafted" for a new cause: The European Union's front against the United States.

Gawain Towler, a British political commentator, observes: "The Israel/Hamas/Palestine issue is a proxy diplomatic war between the US and a European Union trying to flex its muscles on the world stage. Tactical decisions at an EU level could be affected by knowledge of US activity. This is an ongoing strategy."

Indeed, the widening European-American rift might be the big global ideological divide of our time. Europe is associated with universalism, secularism, atheism and post-nationalism. The United States was founded as one nation under God. It is rooted in a strong ideology and celebrates its particularity, exceptionalism and patriotism.

Europe's hijacking of the Palestinian cause came to the fore in the US decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem. While Palestinians strongly objected to the move, the European reaction was emotional and aggressive.

The passionate European stance on Jerusalem should be viewed by Palestinians with a healthy dose of skepticism.

The arguments made against the American recognition of Jerusalem are based on a 1949 UN resolution designating Jerusalem and Bethlehem as "corpus separatum" to be placed under an international regime.

Also, in a region with long memories, Palestinians are aware that three European powers tried to conquer Jerusalem or Palestine in the last two centuries.

Two of those – the French (in 1799) and the British (in 1917) – also issued declarations that such conquests would be made in order to give Palestine to the Jews, its "rightful heirs," as the French stated.

The one European intervention that was supposedly to help the Palestinian Arabs came from the Germans in the 1940s. The Germans "adopted" the Palestinian Arabs for their own war against the British and therefore helped promote the most radical elements in Palestinian society. This in turn contributed to Palestinians rejecting compromise in 1947 and opting to go to war.

But it is not just European intervention of the past that should worry Palestinians. Today too, statements by European leaders about Jerusalem should raise eyebrows.

For example, French President Emmanuel Macron said: "The status of Jerusalem is a question of international security that concerns the entire international community."

Why should this city all of a sudden be a matter for the "international community"? Or turned into a UN colony, as some experts suggest?

EUROPEAN MEDDLING goes much further. The EU has taken a number of measures in an effort to shut down Jewish-owned businesses in the West Bank.

As with BDS, the European boycotts have a negligible effect on Israelis, but adversely affect Palestinians' livelihood, as many of those businesses employ Palestinians. Europeans are deciding that prolonging the conflict is more important than Palestinian jobs.

The SodaStream case was a European success story. SodaStream was under intense European pressure to shut its operation in the West Bank and move within the Green Line. As a result, 500 Palestinians lost their jobs – an application of the European mantra of "Palestine last, conflict first." Beyond the economic damage, such European actions disenfranchise the Palestinians as they rob them



'DADDY'S LITTLE GHOUL': The 'New York Daily News' May 15 cover uses a 'split screen' of Ivanka Trump and the riots in Gaza to 'promote the myth' of 'smiles at the US embassy [opening in Jerusalem], deaths in Gaza.' (Pray for Palestine/Facebook)

Not only is Palestinians' freedom of employment curtailed, but the organization also wants to limit their freedom to shop.

Whether in Brussels or Geneva, Westerners thousands of kilometers away are making decisions for Palestinians. They decided that Palestinians are better off unemployed and restricted in their shopping opportunities in the name of the conflict. Is that the ultimate expression of contemporary colonialism?

These and similar actions lead to what could be described as the "triple occupation of Palestine": by Israel; by the Palestinian Authority, which is viewed by Palestinians as corrupt and out of touch with Palestinians; and by the Europeans, who not only fund and support the PA, but also impose the debilitating narrative of victimhood and conflict-dependency – cultural occupation.

The condescending attitude of Europeans and Westerners to Palestinians has contributed to what is perceived by many as the greatest injustice: keeping Palestinians as refugees.

THE 1940s produced tens of millions of refugees throughout Europe, India and the Middle East. European and other refugees have long been resettled, but for some reason the world singled out the Palestinians, and decided to keep them that way. A special UN agency was created to that effect – the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. Eugene Kontorovich, a prominent law professor at Northwestern University, underscores: "UNRWA does not attempt to resolve the Palestinian refugee problem, but [rather] to perpetuate it."

Palestinians recognize that it is not Israel that has perpetuated their misery as refugees. That injustice was committed by the West. Kontorovich takes it a step further: "The existence of the organization prevents a responsible Palestinian government from emerging. By freeing the Palestinian government of ordinary responsibilities of feeding and educating people, it lets them focus on terrorism and interna-



CATHERINE ASHTON, then-EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, visits a market in Jenin in August 2011. (Reuters)

tional diplomatic theatrics."

Outsiders using the Palestinians to promote their own interests have caused much damage to Palestinians, yet it continues. The most recent iteration of that was in the May 14 riots in Gaza.

Journalists who gathered that morning in Jerusalem to cover the move of the US embassy spoke about Hamas's upcoming attempt to generate a large number of Palestinian deaths in the daily border riots. This was to mark "Nakba Day" (as the Palestinians refer to the anniversary of Israel's independence) and as a way to direct attention away from the embassy opening.

When it became evident in the afternoon that Hamas had been successful, a new opportunity arose for outsiders. The Palestinian cause was recruited for yet another noble cause: opposition to US President Donald Trump. A myth was created that the embassy opening had led to spontaneous riots and that Israel was shooting rioters indiscriminately. Many media outlets even used split screens to promote the myth: smiles at the US embassy, deaths in Gaza.

A few weeks later, US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman reflected on this at a press and policy breakfast held in Jerusalem by The MediaLine, an American news agency covering the Middle East: "You would think that some journalists would take the time to

meet with experts and understand what could have been done differently or better before they criticize. Having done the work and having made those inquiries, I think people would have a hard time figuring out what could have been done differently or better."

As in other cases where outsiders hijack the Palestine cause, details were less relevant, and the media blatantly blamed Israel for the riots' 60 deaths, using gruesome terms such as massacre.

"Who did this better in some other circumstances?" Friedman asked, going on to describe the riots. "Where is the other case where 40,000 people rushed the border [with Israel] under the cover of burning tires, with Molotov cocktails, pistols and kites painted with swastikas, starting fires everywhere? Where did that happen in some other place where the people rushing the borders were committed to killing the citizen on the other side, and somebody did it better?"

Friedman concluded: "Without that work, all that reporting is completely superficial... All you are doing is creating impressions that have no basis in fact."

But basis in fact is not what riders on the Palestinian cause care about. They seemingly care about impression.

Moreover, a major reason Hamas sent people to their deaths is by calculating that European leaders, the media, the UN and other "supporters" of Palestine would pick up the ball, run with it and lash Israel. It worked.

French leader Macron, for one, linked the Gaza deaths to the embassy opening, saying: "Experience shows that whether you like it or not, things like that provoke violence in response... This leads to

people dying." Similarly, the UN Human Rights Council voted to investigate Israel.

Here again, it is Palestinians who pay the price for others who hijack their cause. Hamas's strategy worked, and therefore is likely to be repeated. Palestinian lives are now in grave danger.

YET SOME observers are optimistic. Towler noted a change in how the British media treated the Gaza situation in the following days. "Initially, the deaths of 'innocent protesters' were seen as marks on Trump – the human cost of his arrogance. For 24 hours the media joined in the clamor against Trump, and against the State of Israel. But then, when Hamas admitted that over 50 of those who died that day at the border fence were in fact Hamas members, they realized they had been played by Hamas."

With media outlets apologizing, Towler notes a significant departure: "In the past they would never have accepted fault. The press would have ignored the evidence and continued the campaign against Israel."

Towler believes this is indicative of a broader change in attitude. But it is not just in Europe where people are beginning to realize that intervention in Palestinian affairs is wrong. The same is happening in Iran, which has also "drafted" the Palestinians for its own cause. But last week, Iranians protesting the funding of external wars were chanting "Death to Palestine!"

In both the European boycott and the Iranian military cases, Palestinians are victims of policies that are meant to help them, but in reality hurt them.

Nevertheless, Kontorovich does not think that recognition of this would lead to a change: "Palestinians will certainly suffer economically from any boycott of settlements, but that fact is unlikely to deter European boycotters, who are not truly trying to help the Palestinians but rather to hurt Israel."

"Palestinians feel abandoned," a Westerner working with them in the West Bank observed. They feel abandoned by the Arabs, who are cozying up to Israel; by the US, which moved its embassy to Jerusalem; and by Europe, whose actions promote conflict and perpetuate their narrative of victimhood.

Could this be an opportunity for Palestinians to get closer to Israel?

After all, unlike in Europe where the conflict with Islam is viewed by many as a clash of civilizations, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a dispute. Bitter as the conflict might be, Israelis and Palestinians often actually like each other and get along well. That is clear in places where they interact (such as workplaces, malls and entertainment events) and evident in the decades that preceded the outbreak of violence.

Palestinians telling Europeans and others who hijacked their cause "We are not your toy" could help unleash the massive untapped potential in Palestinian society – and indeed lead to peace. ■



MELISSA MANN: There is a clear expectation not only to be pro-Palestinian, but also pro-BDS. (Courtesy)

BRITISH POLITICAL commentator Gawayn Towler (left) noted a positive change in how the British media treated the May 14 Gaza riots. (Courtesy)



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From left:

A PALESTINIAN employee works at the SodaStream factory in Ma'aleh Adumim in January 2014. The company was forced to lay off Palestinian workers after the BDS movement drove it out of its location beyond the Green Line and into Lod. (Reuters)

PALESTINIANS WORK at a textile factory in the Barkan Industrial Zone, beyond the Green Line, in November 2015. (Reuters)

COEXISTENCE: ARAB women wearing "burkinis" stroll on the beach in Jaffa. (Marc Israel Sellem)