

A civility test between Israelis and Palestinians



Md Mahmudul Hasan, PhD is professor of English at International Islamic University Malaysia.

MD MAHMUDUL HASAN

Beirut-based journalist and writer Soraya Antonius was born in Jerusalem when it was the capital of Palestine. She has written in both English and French and thus helped transmit information about the Palestine question, especially to the Western audience. In a journal article titled “Prisoners for Palestine: A List of Women Political Prisoners,” she provides a heart-wrenching account of the inhumane treatment of Palestinian detainees who are captured by Israeli forces through mass arrests and so-called administrative detention (without trial).

The thrust of Soraya Antonius’ decades-old essay is this: the dehumanising methods of physical and psychological humiliation to which Palestinian prisoners are subjected are driven by an intention to reduce them to “animals.”

Among the stories of the (mis) treatment of Palestinian female prisoners that Soraya Antonius includes is the following account by a female Palestinian detainee: “In March 1979 we were blindfolded and handcuffed and loaded onto a bus. We thought we must be going to another prison; we didn’t know that we were to be released. Up till the very last minute the Israelis behaved meanly. On the tarmac of the airport in Israel – I don’t know which airport as we were still blindfolded – they told us that if we wanted to go to the bathroom to do it



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right there, in the open. I suppose they wanted to photograph us and show that Palestinians are animals, without shame. And in the plane, in addition to keeping us blindfolded and handcuffed, they tied our feet as well... We were not allowed to talk and

they knocked us about in the plane. When it landed, as I waited to go out, I received such a blow from behind that I thought my back was broken. Meanness, right up to the last.”

Fast forward more than 40 years, Israeli cruelty—compounded by meanness—keeps going on. Through oppression and dehumanisation, the Israeli government has continued to try to damage the Palestinian psyche

a December 1 report titled “Released Palestinians allege abuse in Israeli jails.” According to Lucy Williamson, “They [Palestinian prisoners] have described being hit with sticks, having muzzled dogs set on them, and their clothes, food and blankets taken away. One female prisoner has said she was threatened with rape, and that guards twice tear-gassed inmates inside the cells.”

to break my legs and my hands... In the beginning, I was in a lot of pain. Then after a while, I knew that they were broken, so I stopped using them. I only used them when I went to the toilet... They came in with their dogs. They let the dogs attack us and then they started beating us. They took out mattresses, our clothes, our pillows, and they threw our food on the floor... The dog attacking me wore a muzzle with very sharp edges – his muzzle and claws left marks all over my body.”

Despite all the inhumane treatment that Israelis mete out to the Palestinians both in prisons and outside, the dominant Israeli narrative seeks to present the Palestinians as savage, violent terrorists, suicide bombers, and animals. This resonates with the colonial racial categorisation of the colonised.

On October 9, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant called the Palestinians “human animals.” This led a Geneva-based UN committee to voice concern that such language use could “incite genocidal actions” against Palestinians. The recent flare-up of Israeli violence against Palestinians has left us in shock and disbelief, as we have seen outcomes of “genocidal actions” in Gaza and the West Bank.

Since October 7, the Israeli government has descended on Gaza with madness and a bloodthirsty carnage—all with the complicity of Western governments. It has so far killed nearly 16,000 men, women and children who had nothing to do with Hamas’ attacks on Israel.

Still, the Israelis are deemed civilised and the Palestinians savages! As opposed to the negative and pejorative assumptions about Palestinians, Israelis are routinely described as civilised and democratic.

Given the Manichean, dualistic division between Israelis and Palestinians in the media, I propose a

touchstone test for determining the civility or otherwise of the Israeli and the Palestinian authorities. That is, to compare between how, for decades, tens of thousands of Palestinian detainees have been treated in Israeli dungeons and detention centres, and how Israeli captives have been treated by Palestinian groups like Hamas.

I welcome all—especially fair-minded Western scholars and journalists—to do this civility test. They may wish to talk to the Israeli captives who have returned from the custody of Hamas in different phases.

We have seen in the media that an Israeli elderly woman named Yocheved Lifshitz (85) said “shalom” (peace) to her Hamas captors when being released from captivity. *The Guardian* regarded Lifshitz’s statement regarding her experience in Hamas’ care as “a rare description of humanity in a savage conflict,” which Israeli commentators described as “a public relations win for Hamas.” Journalist Riley Stuart of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) began a December 3 report with these words, “Two Israeli hostages smiling and waving goodbye to their captors from inside the safety of a Red Cross vehicle, preparing for their ride to freedom.”

On a final note, Australian journalist Tony Clifton and the late French war photojournalist Catherine Leroy covered the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. They had at their disposal pictures and footage of Israeli brutalities in Lebanon, which Western media outlets would not want to print. Later, Clifton and Leroy produced the 1983 book *God Cried* to tell the world what atrocities were going on in Lebanon in 1982.

I invite journalists who cover the Israel-Palestine conflict—but are beholden to the preferences of the media owners or to the pressures of the advertisers—to follow the example of Clifton and Leroy.

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

We must do away with systemic gender bias



Sarzah Yeasmin is a Boston-based Bangladeshi writer. She works at Harvard Kennedy School and is currently pursuing a micro-master's in data and economics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

SARZAH YEASMIN

The 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, an international call to raise awareness and prevent violence against women and girls, are pivotal towards meeting the 2030 gender equality benchmark of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The key directives of the international movement entail tangible steps of listening, inquiring, validating, enhancing, and supporting women to ensure that the goals of gender equality and public safety are met.

Violence against women is called the Shadow Pandemic, which has been intensified further by the perils brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. The worldwide spike in gender-based violence (GBV) can be attributed to prolonged armed conflicts, climate change, socialisation of genders into set hierarchies, and normalisation of continued violence. The subject of gender-based violence gained visibility as more women entered public spheres and as atrocities of mass rape

impact gender-based violence has on the survivors and on societies. One in three women has been subject to sexual violence perpetrated by intimate partners. Violence against women costs at least \$1.5 trillion worldwide; yet, it continues to prevail. Division within women’s movement and advocacy is one of the cruxes that normalises this continuation, especially when it comes to the economy of violence. Veiled misogyny and corporate interests have co-opted the progressive language of gender equality and women’s rights movements to the extent that violence can be passed on as female empowerment and freedom. This is evident in the realm of sex work, where freedom comes with strings attached. What is sold as empowerment may not necessarily be empowering. Production and public display of gender-based violence makes it even more palatable.

International conventions, while correct in spirit, have been unactionable and have not been able to penetrate the gridlocks

retraumatise the survivors of violence by questioning their character and conduct in court. Yet, much of the social burden of proof lies on the survivor, the process further daunted by a lack of a survivor-oriented approach to safeguard the affected group.

Gender-based violence is multifarious and stems from diverse contexts. The overwhelming majority of GBV targets

of the 16 Days of Activism.

Criminal laws across borders do not recognise the disparity and diversity of such cases and fall short of recognising even the bare minimum. Cases of rape are not even recognised as such unless they meet set standards. The concentrated efforts of the campaign need to withstand systems where violence is a built-in mechanism that is necessary for the system to exist in its



VISUAL: KAZI TAHSEN AGAZ APURBO

are women and girls, subject to intimate partner violence or violation by perpetrators who are known. But men, transgender, gender-fluid, and gender non-confirming individuals are also subject to violence based on their gender expression. So are women, girls, and gender non-conforming people from minority communities, poor and Indigenous individuals, and women with disabilities or pre-existing health conditions. A devastatingly high rate of gender non-conforming people have reportedly lost lives to violence globally. Dr Dara Cohen, professor of public policy at Harvard Kennedy School who has conducted extensive field research on the use of rape as a weapon of war, states that when men are raped, it is usually termed as torture. Such expansive understanding of how unequally gender norms and expressions can operate broadens the scope

current state. Feminist activist and author Caroline Criado Perez studies how gender bias is built into these supposedly neutral systems from their very inception. While it is important to galvanise around violence and high-profile cases, the micro networks, policy decisions, and designs that produce repeated violations, denigrations, and indifference need to be part of the prevention discourse. Awareness is only the first step.

Gender inequality and violence as the outcome of a society are symptomatic of the ethos that shape policies, family structures and opportunities for men and women. Much of the violence is regarded as violence due to the absence of affirmative consent given by the affected individual. However, the concepts that the recognition of violence are based on are as convoluted as the structures within which violence occurs.

Consent without context does not mean much. Catharine A MacKinnon, former special gender adviser to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, points out the futility of basing arguments of gendered violence on the idea of consent, and argues that real consent does not exist as women who are structurally unequal in society cannot be free and equal in sex.

Gender-based crimes are also considered to be life-force crimes as women become strategic targets for denigration and erasure in acts of war and revenge. Such brutality has been normalised by taking gender-based violence as a given in both private and public spheres and as a coincidental outcome during episodes of aggression. The gravity of such reprehensible crimes against women has been deflated and swept under the rug as cataloguing them into mainstream and national narratives would promote abortions and contraceptives (two highly contested reproductive rights issues in the world).

In the context of Bangladesh, workers’ demand for higher wages and protection of their rights is a critical gender equality matter as most of the workers in the leading export industry, ready-made garment, are women. Women caregivers and domestic workers are increasingly joining the diaspora of migrant workers. Gender-based violence at the workplace and public sphere has devastating consequences as in recent years Bangladeshi female migrant workers have returned home in coffins. The dedicated days of activism produce awareness of government failures worldwide to address the high proportions of gender-based violence and when the diverse contexts for violence are accounted for, the proportions of loss are even higher.

The wide transfer networks within social service non-profits and civil society organisations may sometimes befuddle help-seekers. Some social services do exist. The caveat is that of creating effective access so that seeking help is not costly, time-consuming, and/or a retraumatising experience. We need to amplify the voices of affected women and individuals, as the ones who are visible in the movement may not necessarily be the ones who are most affected. Regardless of the quotidian inertia of national governments, as women’s movements around the world become more inclusive and critical of the system that enables violence, more promise lies ahead of the 16 Days campaign.

camp during armed conflicts became widely covered—when survivors (such as from Bangladesh, Rwanda, and former Yugoslavia) came forward and testified against the brutal acts of war.

The data on violence against women and girls that is available shows the crippling

and biases built into disparate and national legal frameworks. Only sustained efforts from the local civil society and women’s rights organisations have been able to achieve greater impact in Bangladesh, such as taking out the discriminatory clause from the Evidence Act, 1872, which used to