

A Call for Consistency

Palestinian Resistance and Radical US Women of Color

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On January 27, 2002, the racialized marker of the “irrationally violent Muslim extremist” was feminized when the media announced the emergence of the “first female suicide bomber,” Wafa Idris. As the world had recently been reduced by George Bush to “those who are with us versus those who are with terrorism,” the US media painted Wafa Idris as an irrationally violent terrorist brainwashed by Islam and on the side of evil. Now the question is: will radical women of color shift the dominant discourse from focusing on whether we agree with Palestinian methods of resistance to a recognition and understanding of historical conditions that produce female-led martyr operations? We have learned—from African slavery and the colonization of the Americas—that when women are faced with no options, they will continue to resist.

Consider Wafa’s everyday life experiences. She worked as a volunteer for the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS). She carried children on stretchers, witnessed brutal deaths and injuries, and evacuated bodies daily that were, quite literally, in pieces. A friend of Wafa’s, who also worked as a volunteer for the PRCS, had given first aid to a boy who had been shot in the head by an Israeli soldier, and found herself holding his brain in her hands. Today, children’s games in Palestine mean making victory signs while playing on a stretcher carried by playmates, or playing dead in an alley several yards away from where older children are clashing with Israeli soldiers.

For most Palestinians, the violence Wafa experienced daily is standard operating procedure. In spring 2002, journalists from the Egyptian newspaper *Al Ahrām Weekly* interviewed international photographers who had been in Palestine to develop an art exhibit about children. The journalists quoted the photographers saying, “The streets looked like a football match between kids and soldiers but the kids were being shot...it was surreal...the rules of the game: get shot or don’t get shot.” The photographers added, “Kids stand up and curse Israeli soldiers or they go in front of them and lift their shirt to bare their chest as they are shot. One kid had two bullets in him...he lifts his shirt and then points to the center of the chest calling, ‘Give the third...come on...give me the third!’” The photographers were there taking pictures and they said that they would see kids dropping and being shot at with no sound.

One photographer showed *Al Ahrām* writers a photograph of children who appeared to be smiling, holding hands in their school uniforms next to graffiti on a wall that read, “Israel means killing children.” Looking at the photo of the children, the reporter asked, “They were laughing?” The photographer replied, “They were dying.”

Between the first *intifada* and March 2005, more than four thousand Palestinians civilian were killed and thirty thousand more were injured. Palestinians have also been locked up in ghettos controlled by the Israeli army, who use US-supplied “Apache” helicopters, tanks, and other supplies. F-16s mow down people, houses, olive groves, and fields every day. Babies die at birth at civilian checkpoints as Israelis regularly shoot and kill ambulance drivers and target paramedics saving the injured. In Palestine, many of the elites have left; many are suicidal; those who have stayed behind are throwing themselves out in the streets to die. Israelis are using fighter jets, helicopters, and tanks to attack refugee camps—including Balata, Jabaliya, and Dheisha—and to occupy Ramallah, so the list goes on and on.

Israeli massacres cannot be viewed as accidents of history. They are systematized and an integral policy of the military. Israel was created by a process of war, by pillaging the very fabric that held the indigenous Palestinian population together: Palestinian land, Palestinian national identity, and Palestinian interpretations of respectability. For example, mothers and daughters have been violated in front of their fathers, brothers, and husbands. When we examine the dominant Israeli historical narrative, it is difficult to ignore the massacres that facilitated the process of “nation building” and the use of fear to encourage Palestinian displacement from historical Palestine.

Moshe Dayan, the former prime minister and ex-Israeli general, admitted that every Israeli town in every Israeli neighborhood was built on the remains of a Palestinian village with an Arab name, Arab people, and an Arab history associated with it. For example, Beir Shiva was Bier Al Saba’a; Tel Aviv was Tel Abib; and Acco was Acca. Currently we are witnessing the transformation of El Khalil to Hebron. Yitzhak Rabin, the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and revered martyr for peace, massacred civilians in villages surrounding Jerusalem when he led the Israeli army into the city during the 1967 wars. And Ariel Sharon, whom the Israeli public elected in order to “send a message to” Palestinians, engaged in many massacres, including Kibya in 1953, Sabra and Shatilla in 1982, and Jenin in 2002.

Israeli massacres are often accompanied by sexual assault, particularly of pregnant women, as a symbolic way of uprooting the child from the mother, or the Palestinian from the land. Today, another strategy to disrupt childbearing is the prevention of pregnant women in labor from crossing borders for medical care. In 2005, a report submitted to the UN General Assembly from UN agencies operating in Palestine exposed the detrimental effects of Israeli checkpoints and the apartheid wall on Palestinian women’s health, such as the denial of obstetric care to 61 Palestinian women who were forced against their will to give birth at one of Israel’s illegal checkpoints. The report stated that from the beginning of the second *intifada* to March 2004, a number of unsafe deliveries in which both mothers and infants have died have occurred at checkpoints. 55 Palestinian women have been forced to give birth at checkpoints, and thirty-three newborns were stillborn at checkpoints, owing to delays or denial of permission to reach medical facilities.

Palestinians are made aware of the message behind Israeli massacres because the Israeli army advertises it on bullhorns to trigger panic and fear. In a series of air raids, the calls would often sound like, “If you surrender yourselves and leave your homes, you will not be hurt. If you don’t, remember what happened in Deir

Yassin.” In Deir Yassin, approximately 460 Palestinians, most of them women and children, were executed en masse. Some of them were tortured, some of them were beaten to death, and some of them who survived recounted the mutilation and the torture of their own family members while they were held back to watch.

As we look at the prospects for the future, we cannot forget the women and children executed en masse in 1982 at the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Lebanon—some of them killed using glass bottles instead of bullets so the pain could be felt for hours. Meanwhile, most of us in the United States are subsidizing this at the rate of \$6 billion of our tax dollars per year. We also cannot separate all of this from histories of European colonialism and expansion and US colonization of the Americas; indeed, US democracy was founded on the theft from and genocide of African Americans, Native Americans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans.

Contrary to US media propaganda, there is a real and massive disparity in the balance of power between Israel and the Palestinians. Israel is a settler colonial state and as it stands today, in order for this colonial project to succeed, Palestinian people cannot exist within the dominant Israeli national consciousness. For Israel to consolidate its regional military and economic power, it must continue to assert itself as indigenous within the region. And in order to pull off this feat, Israel has recreated its entire history, which, in turn, entails the displacement of the Palestinian population. According to the vision behind this project, at best, the “Palestinian people” are destined to become a relic, incorporated within a new Israeli construct as a minority—despite the fact that Israeli cultural consciousness is a recreation of everything that is indigenous to the land of Palestine.

The ongoing colonization of Palestine has entailed a process of cultural appropriation in which Palestinian dance, food, clothing, and arts have been refashioned through European cultural forms, redefined as “Israeli” and denied for the Palestinians to enjoy in their homeland. Today, 70% of the Palestinian population has been forced into exile. Despite United Nations Resolution 194, which defines the right to return as an inalienable human right, the Israeli government continues to deny and violate the right of return, each time it confiscates land, each time it displaces a Palestinian family, each time it demolishes a home, each time it harasses civilians at checkpoints, each time it holds up workers on the way to work, and each time it imposes closure upon the occupied territories. For those of you who wonder about the peace process initiated by the Oslo agreement in 1993, more land has been confiscated since 1993 than between 1967 and 1993.

Many Palestinians remain landless, but the Palestinian struggle to demand the right to exist as a unified people with the opportunity to return home persists. There are similarities between the Palestinian context and Vieques, Puerto Rico, Makua Valley in Hawai’i, and indigenous struggles all over the world, where the destruction of land and the uprooting of people has erased spiritual and sacred indigenous spaces and blocked access to food and other elements of sustainability; but many of us have not yet made these connections. Palestine is often isolated as an anomaly that stands outside of history. As a significant partner of US imperialism on a global scale, Israel has been an executor of discrimination and racism internationally. It has provided military expertise and hardware to other abusive undemocratic regimes, and Israeli intelligence training has been central to the development of oppressive

regimes throughout the Global South, including South Africa, Uganda, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Indonesia. As we move forward, I hope radical women of color will begin to recognize the transformative possibilities of our shared histories for movement building. And I hope that today, we will be consistent in our critiques of colonialism by linking the Palestinian struggle to indigenous struggles internationally, as well as all struggles against imperialism from a radical women of color perspective.

Allow me to return to Wafa Idris and where, at this historical juncture, do radical women of color, with our focus on intersections of race, class, gender, sexism, homophobia, colonialism, and imperialism, locate her? Will we explore the impact of colonization on Wafa's family? Palestinian families? Palestinian communities? What about increases in domestic violence? Shifts in women's labor? Will we take interest in Palestinian feminists' analysis of women's resistance? Where do we locate her in the context of feminist heroine metaphors that highlight women's transformations from passivity to agency? And how might feminist theorizations of the body grapple with a woman who deploys the body as a weapon against an unstoppable military machine?

Radical women of color movements provide useful frameworks for historicizing Wafa Idris' power-laden realities. Yet as long as we buy into the dominant corporate media propaganda that devalues Palestinian lives, blames the victim, and victimizes the oppressor, we will fail to recognize her struggle against the intersecting axes of colonialism, racism, classism, and sexism, and we will fail to see her humanity. Today, I would like to know if Wafa Idris would ever be positioned among us? We must explore more closely why progressive women of color have not called Zionism out, to the same extent that other colonialist projects are ferociously called out?

Typically, progressives in the US value integration, so sites on the left often exclude those seeking national liberation. Arab women activists have contributed a great deal of work to the task of exposing the Palestinian struggle as a legitimate anti-colonialist cause. Still, I have repeatedly heard my Palestinian sisters make the following claim to other activists: "I am not asking to 'become American' and I'm not asking you to redefine me as a US 'person of color' or a 'woman of color.' I'm asking you to recognize our struggle for liberation and support our struggle to return home."

Despite the media blackout on the Palestinian struggle, coalitions between radical people of color and the Palestinian struggle have existed for decades. Recently, women of color organizations such as INCITE! Women of Color against Violence and the Women of Color Resource Center have highlighted links between Palestinian women's struggles and indigenous women's struggles. These organizations have also opened up spaces for coalition between US women of color; immigrant, refugee, and displaced women; and women struggling with their communities against US imperialism globally.

In the last several years, we have seen our struggles intensify. Our communities have been polarized along the lines of those who say that the "war on terror" has nothing to do with us, and those who refuse to be silent about the backlash; the detentions; the surveillance; the use of Arab, Iranian, and Afghan women's

bodies as symbols for justifying war; the Bush administration's theft of resources from poor communities of color into the US military budget; the use of people of color as cannon fodder for Bush's war; and the rape and sexual harassment of women of color in the US military. As Israel continues its slaughter of Palestinians and the rest of the world sits back and watches, let us assert that Palestinians exist. Let us continue this struggle. All Palestinians are granted the right to return to their original homes or towns of origin. Let us mount our resistance! Let us make history! Almost 2 million dead in Iraq, and we continue to fight! Over five hundred years of uprooting Native America, and we continue to fight! Over half of the Palestinian population expelled and we continue to demand Palestinians' right to exist! Let us demand that the United States and Israel end their colonization of Arab land! If we continue to rise up—Zionism, colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia will cease to exist! This is the only just solution.