

## **Remembering, Repeating, and Not Working Through: On the Interactability of the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict**

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When Anwar Sadat, the then-president of Egypt, made his historic visit to Israel in 1977, he declared that seventy percent of the problems between Arabs and Israelis are psychological. However, both sides continued to ignore the emotional motivations and unconscious processes that fuel this conflict. What Carlo Strenger does and what we should do is trying to give answers to Sadat's indirect invitation. Psychoanalysts have a lot to say about unconscious emotions on an individual level, but our job here is to develop a large group psychology by trying to understand the unconscious motives of both the leaders and their nations without assigning blame to any of them (Volkan 2004, Falk 2004, Wirth 2007).

### **The syndrome of fanaticism**

Terrorists, in particular suicide murderers, are themselves fanatics and they are guided by fanatical leaders. In following Erich Fromm I want to emphasize the fanatic's "passion" and "rashness," on the basis of which he "uncompromisingly" and "rigidly" defends his "overrated idea" (Hole 1995, p. 37). The fanatic has killed off all feelings for other people and projected them to the party or group whose ideology seems reasonable to him. He idolizes the collective and its shared ideology, to which he has become enslaved. His complete submission under this idol creates a passion within him whose emotional quality Erich Fromm characterizes as "cold fire" and "burning ice," as "passion lacking warmth." "The fanatic acts, thinks, and feels on behalf of his idol" (1961, p. 61) and is prepared to sacrifice for it everything he still holds dear in life.

For example, the Palestinian Nizzar Iyan confessed in an interview with a German journalist that he found his greatest fulfillment in his sons' sacrifice as suicide murderers in the fight against Israel. When his 17-year-old son Ibrahim actually took his life in a suicide bombing, his father said: "My son Ibrahim is dead. I never felt happier than at the moment, when they came and said: 'The Jews killed your son.'" And when the interviewer asked, "But you, after all, are his father, you must feel pain," the father replied, unmoved, "I am quite honest, I am saying this out of conviction, I do not feel grief, I feel joy, true joy, that my son has

accomplished a part of what we believed in. Life has no savor when one cannot accomplish one's dreams and one's goals".

Is this father one of those typical fanatics who "place ideas above people", whose "dedication to ideas is abnormally powerful, while their dedication to people is strangely blocked or defective" (Hole 1995, p. 93)? "Theoretically speaking, the fanatic is a highly narcissistic personality" (Fromm, 1961, p. 61).

But is this really the whole story? I assume that this Palestinian father as an individual feels the same despair, pain, and grief as any other father when he heard of his son's death. But besides being an individual, his feelings are influenced by the fact that he belongs to the national group of the Palestinians. He has not only an individual identity but also a collective identity. And this collective identity tells him that it is a great honor for him to sacrifice his son in the holy war. Especially in times of war, trauma, and anxiety, the fact of being part of a large group has an enormous impact on the feeling and thinking of the people.

### **How to become a terrorist?**

We know a few things about the suicide murderers among the Palestinians. In particular, the young people who volunteer for suicide attacks have been subjected to constant traumatization from childhood. However wretched, miserable and bleak their own lives might be, an absolute identification with the ideals of the group compensates the individuals for their disgrace. "Social narcissism" – as Fromm pointed out (1964, pp. 62-94) provides an important prop for an individual's feeling of self-worth.

Some of today's Islamic terrorists may have been traumatized in refugee camps, recruited there by the various secret services, and raised and educated in special Koran schools and training camps. In the solitude of such camps, the communities function as family substitutes and their fanatical leaders as substitute parent figures so that children and adolescents develop an intense emotional and intellectual dependency.

This dynamic in particular applies to people living in refugee camps under miserable conditions for several generations, who are traumatized by the everyday presence of violent

behavior. However, the New York terrorists of September 11 were no Palestinians but well-educated students.

As Otto Kernberg (2002) stresses, traumatization results not only from personally experienced violence but also from violent acts one has witnessed. Such processes have been going on in the Near East for decades. Through their collective identity, the Arabs feel close to the suffering of the Palestinian people. They sympathize with (which means originally: to suffer with) the Palestinians and have developed a collective hatred of Israel and the United States, and in part also of the Western World as a whole. Some individuals may feel a particular duty to support the Palestinians in their struggle against Israel and its powerful protector precisely due to their privileged position.

Even the German terrorists of the “Red Army Fraction” (RAF), who launched terrorist attacks on symbolic representatives of the government and the capitalist economic system during the 1970s, were people motivated by high moral principles and involved in various social projects before their violent activities. As I argued elsewhere, these German terrorists were “unconscious delegates” (Stierlin 1978) of their parents. In a certain sense they did not act voluntarily but unconsciously, on their parents’ behalf, caught up in a trans-generational conflict (Wirth 2007).

The Islamic terrorists joining the holy war are often caught up in a similar generational context: The privileged Arabic families, on the one hand, live with an almost unimaginable oil prosperity and enjoy the luxury of Western society, yet, on the other hand, support hatred against the West. This double standard presents a difficult conflict in the clash between the generations which is resolved in that the sons of economically privileged families, sometimes at the conscious and sometimes at the unconscious bidding of their parents, will join the holy war which their fathers only speak and dream of. Indeed, after September 11, much information has been found about terror groups being financially supported by numerous Islamic businessmen who successfully pursue their business in Europe and the United States and salve their Islamic consciences through such donations.

Let me finish with a remark on the parallels between Israelis and Palestinians: Both groups are traumatized survivors and refugees. Both groups suffer from deep collective narcissistic injuries. Both sides have good historical reasons for feeling an ownership of Israel or

Palestine. Under the pressure of their bloody fight against one another that has been going on for decades, both groups have developed a paranoid attitude. The paranoid view of the world holds each group together like a fortress wall. From my point of view, there are two main psychological problems:

1. On the one hand, the paranoid world view is a defense mechanism and, on the other hand, it is anchored in reality. This means that one can find very good reasons for paranoid world view. And this means that it is very difficult to change such a paranoid world view.
2. Each side gives the other side good reasons to adhere to its own policy. Both sides interact in a way psychoanalytic couple therapists describe as collusion; this means an unconscious interplay of two partners who have chosen themselves and make such a good team that they – in a way – complement one another. Sadists and masochists are such a complementary collusive couple. The narcissistic collusion is also very common.

“It is very hard for traumatized people in their emotional pain to be aware of the pain of others and to empathize with them” (Falk 2004, p. 90). Perhaps we can discuss what psychoanalysts can contribute to find a way out of this collusive destructive interaction.

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