



HUMAN RIGHTS



How Israel's Jewish terrorist became a victim

Jonathan Cook, *The Electronic Intifada*, 14 June 2006

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Jameel Saffouri, a member of the political bureau of Abnaa el-Balad and one of the seven Palestinians in Shafa Amr arrested for allegedly participating in the death of the Israeli gunman who murdered Palestinian civilians on a bus in Shafa Amr. (Abnaa el-Balad)

Imagine the following scenario. A Palestinian gunman boards a bus inside Israel and rides it to the city of Netanya. Close to the end of the line, he walks over to the driver, levels his automatic rifle against the man's head and pumps him with bullets. He turns and empties the rest of the magazine -- one of 14 in his backpack -- into the passenger behind the driver and two young women sitting across the gangway.

As bystanders in the street outside look on in horror, our gunman then reloads his weapon and sprays the bus with yet more fire, injuring 20 people. He approaches a woman huddled beneath a seat, trying to hide from him, lowers the gun to her head and pulls the trigger. The magazine is empty. As he tries to load a third clip, she grabs the burning barrel of the gun while other passengers rush him.

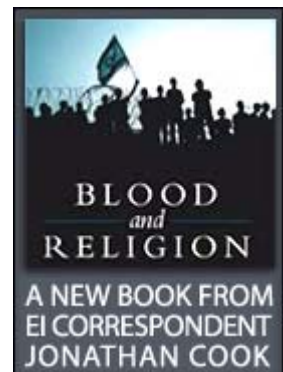
Seeing their chance, the onlookers storm the bus and fuelled by a mixture of passions -- fury, indignation and fear of further attack -- they beat the gunman to death.

As the news breaks, Israeli TV prefers to continue its coverage of a local football match rather report the killings. Later, when the channels do cover the deaths, they start by showing the picture of the gunman with the caption "God bless his soul" -- in the same manner as they would normally relate to the victim of a terror attack.

Despite the Prime Minister denouncing the gunman as a terrorist to the world, domestically the media and police concentrate instead on the "lynch mob" who

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killed the gunman. The police launch a secretive investigation which after 10 months leads to the arrests of seven men on charges of murdering him, and the promise of more arrests to come. A police spokesman describes the men's act against the gunman as one of "cold-blooded murder".

Fanciful? Ridiculous? Well, exactly these events have unfolded in Israel over the past year -- except that the location was not the Jewish city of Nentanya but the Arab town of Shafa'amr in the Galilee; the gunman was not a Palestinian but an Israeli soldier using his army-issue M-16; and the victims were not Israeli Jews but Israeli Arabs.

See how it now starts to make sense.

The killing of four Palestian citizens of Israel by the 19-year-old soldier Eden Natan Zada on 4 August last year, shortly before the disengagement from Gaza, has been quietly forgotten by the world. After the Arab victims were buried, the only question that concerned Israelis was who killed Zada. They appear now to have got their answer: seven men from Shafa'amr have been rounded up by Israeli police to stand trial for his "cold-blooded" murder.

No one was interested in the official neglect of the families of Shafa'amr's dead, all of whom were denied the large compensation payments given to Israeli victims of Palestinian terror. A ministerial committee ruled that, because Zada was a serving soldier, his attack could not be considered a terrorist incident. Apparently only Arabs can be terrorists. To this day the state has not given the families a penny of the compensation automatically awarded to Jewish families.

There was no investigation of why Zada, well-known for his extremist views, had been allowed to go AWOL for weeks from his unit without attempts to trace him. Or how his family's repeated warnings that he had threatened to do something "terrible" to stop the disengagement had been ignored by the authorities. No one questioned why, a few days before his attack, the police had sent Zada away after he tried to hand in his gun.

Even more disturbing, no one discussed why Zada, who openly belonged to a racist and outlawed movement, Kach, which demands the expulsion, if not eradication, of Arabs from the Holy Land, had been allowed to serve in the army. How had he and thousands of other Kach supporters been left in peace to promote their obscene ideas? Why were these Kach activists, mostly young Israelis, demonstrating openly against the Gaza disengagement, assaulting policemen and soldiers, when the group was supposedly underground?

And why did the authorities not round up and question Zada's Kach friends in his West Bank settlement of Tapuah after the attack? Why was their possible involvement in its planning never considered, nor their role in inciting him to his deed?

The point was that the Israeli authorities wanted Zada to be dismissed as a lone, crazy gunman -- like Baruch Goldstein before him, the army doctor who in 1994 opened fire in the Palestinian city of Hebron, killing 29 Muslim worshippers at the Tomb of the Patriarchs and wounding 125 others.

Although Yitzhak Rabin, the prime minister then, denounced Goldstein as an "errant weed", a shrine and park was built for him nearby, in the settlement of Kiryat Arba, venerating him as a "saint" and "a righteous and holy man". Far from being isolated, his shrine regularly attracts thousands of Israeli Jews who congregate deep in Palestinian territory to honour him.

Instead of seeking out and eradicating this growing strain of Jewish fundamentalism in the wake of the Shafa'amr terror attack, Israel claimed that finding and punishing the men who killed Zada was the priority. It was a matter of law and order, said Dan Ronen, the police force's northern commander. He told the Hebrew media: "In a country with law and order, despite the sensitivity, people can't do whatever they see fit. I hope the Arab sector will display maturity and responsibility."

This sounds like an outrageous double standard to the citizens of Shafa'amr, and to the country's more than one million Palestinian citizens. Enforcing the law has never been a major consideration when the offenders are Jewish and the victims are Arabs, even when the killings occur inside Israel.

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Arab citizens have not forgotten the massacre of 49 men, women and children by a unit of soldiers who enforced a last-minute curfew on the Israeli village of Kfar Qassem in 1956, executing the villagers -- Arabs, of course -- at the checkpoint one by one as they innocently returned home from a day's work in the fields.

During their trial, the Haaretz newspaper reported that the soldiers received a 50 per cent pay increase and that it was obvious the men were "not treated as criminals but as heroes". Found guilty of an "administrative error", the commander was given a one penny fine.

Nor was anyone held to account when six unarmed Arab citizens were shot dead by the security services in the Galilean town of Sakhnin in 1976 as they protested against another wave of land confiscations that deprived rural Arab communities of their farm land. The prime minister of the day, Rabin again, refused even to launch an investigation.

Some 25 years later, an inquiry was held into the killing by the police of 13 unarmed Arabs in the Galilee in October 2000 as they protested the deaths of Palestinians at the Noble Sanctuary in Jerusalem -- the trigger for the intifada. Six years on, however, not a single policeman has been charged over the deaths inside Israel. Even the commanders who illegally authorised the use of an anti-terror sniper unit against demonstrators armed only with stones have not been punished.

Israel's Arab citizens are also more than familiar with the story of the "Bus 300 affair" of 1984, when two Palestinian gunmen from the occupied territories were captured after hijacking a bus inside Israel. Led away in handcuffs by the Shin Bet security service, the two men were later reported dead.

No one was ever charged over the killings, even though it was widely known at the time who had killed the men and later one senior Shin Bet operative, Ehud Yatom, admitted breaking the men's skulls with a rock. In 1986, to forestall the threat of any indictments, the president of the day, Chaim Herzog, gave all the Shin Bet agents involved an amnesty from prosecution.

If it is shown in court that Zada was in fact beaten to death after the crowd knew he had been restrained, then this history -- of the state's repeated denial of justice to the Arab victims of its violence -- must be taken into account. No one can reasonably have expected the onlookers to stay calm knowing that Zada, like other Jewish emissaries of the state before him, would receive either no punishment or a few years of jail and a pardon because he killed Arabs rather than Jews.

Israel has shown time and again that it selectively enforces law and order, depending on the ethnicity of killer and victim.

Commander Ronen observed at a press conference after the Shafa'amr arrests: "Since October 2000 we have come a long way in our relations with the Arab sector." If that is true, which is doubtful, the authorities have again made every effort to tear apart what little is left of that trust.

Jonathan Cook, based in Nazareth, is the author of "Blood and Religion: The Unmasking of the Jewish and Democratic State", published by Pluto Press and available in the US from University of Michigan Press. His website is www.jkcook.net.

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