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## **UNMASKING 'MARTYRDOM' A HOLOCAUST LEGACY 1939-2002**

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The power of personalized suffering and death is piped into Arab, European and American homes by their respective news networks: in turn, al-Jazeera, the preeminent Qatari channel, BBC and the CNN, NBC networks. As an Australian psychiatrist recently returned from a visit to the US and Israel, I struggle to make sense and to reconcile the interpretations imposed on these images of suffering. I read to learn, to orient, to remain sane in the current culture of trauma. I struggle to remain connected, to continue to be a feeling human being.

The temptation, even at a distance, to 'switch off', to distract myself, is seductive. Why continue to watch those images, to read the words, then to dream the nightmares? Am I just a glutton for punishment or do I have an obligation to make sense of it? As a psychiatrist, an article in a recent issue of Time magazine written by a psychiatrist immersed in the conflict caught my eye.

Dr Eyad Sarraj, psychiatrist and founder of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights, provided his version of the background to the current Palestinian - Israeli conflict. He stated that in 'every case of martyrdom there is a personal story of tragedy and trauma.' And then explained how the expression of 'deep-seated feeling of shame has taken root in the Arab psyche' [Time Magazine (April 8, 2002)] leading to the desire for martyrdom as a redemptive option chosen by young Palestinians like 16 year old Ayat Akhras who blew herself up outside an Israeli supermarket. He argued that such a death in dignity was preferred to the helpless victimhood and suffering, as if they are the only alternatives. If this were true, tragic it would be.

However, having also dealt in a clinical setting with suicidal young people for over 20 years, and being the child of a Holocaust survivor of Auschwitz, I offer another explanation for the shame experienced by suicidal and homicidal Palestinian young people. I accept Dr Sarraj assertion that shame 'is the most painful emotion in the Arab culture, producing the feeling that one is unworthy to live.' In fact I would not restrict that definition to the Arab culture. In English, the well-known expression 'I could have died of shame' testifies to that unbearable emotional state. DR Sarraj attributed the source of the Palestinian shame to continued Israeli military occupation, culminating in the destruction of the P.L.O in Lebanon in the early 80's. The stone throwing defiance has since matured by shifting their target from Israeli soldiers to exposed Israeli civilians

where ever they are, bus stop, market, café, they are all enemy. Hence, according to this logic, all Israeli citizens are legitimate killing-targets. Suicide-homicide becomes a culturally sanctioned and financially rewarded military-pseud religious act. In this scenario the ultimate reward is heaven, and suicide-homicide becomes, in DR Sarraj's opinion, the 'ultimate test of faith'.

As a psychiatrist, I must object to such a perversion of psychological reasoning. Anyone who has worked with suicidal young people knows that they have a sense about them of being 'disposable'. A very common theme relates to shame and worthlessness and here I do agree with Dr Sarraj. However, in my experience, where suicide is not part of a clinically obvious mental illness, like serious depression, schizophrenia or other serious conditions, the shame that accompanies the young person's despair can be traced to long standing family dysfunction. The young person invariably feels that the adult care givers in their life have betrayed them.

This difficult fact means that a most common feature in families with suicidal young people is 'scapegoating', the attributing of blame to where it does not belong. This process serves to regulate the intense guilt experienced by, usually, parents, when they gain insight to their long-term dysfunction having contributed to their child's despair. Turning to the Palestinian community. What is virtually impossible at the moment for the Palestinian community to acknowledge is the degree to which their leader, their father figure, Mr. Arafat, has betrayed them.

Dennis Ross, former president Clinton's special negotiator on the Middle East, after ruthlessly pushing Israel to make maximum concessions in 2000, the offer Arafat not only did not take up, but then proceeded to embark on a policy of homicide bombing of Israeli civilians, believes that Arafat lacks the capacity, both psychologically and politically, to make peace on any terms. Interestingly, Dr Sarraj decided to not include this broader contextual analysis of the dynamics of so called 'martyrs.' I say 'so-called' because clearly history has recorded authentic martyrs. However, history may decide that a different process was at work with the tragedy of the current generation of Palestinian youth.

It is said that one can judge a society by the books it reads the most. In the West Bank those books are Mein Kampf and The Protocols of The Elders of Zion. Textbooks at Bir Zeit University are supplied by the Institute for Historical Review in Torrence California. The relationship between what is happening in the streets of the West Bank towns, like Jenin, and the propaganda the children are being fed by teachers and leaders creates a tragedy of major proportions. That the Oslo "Peace" process was a cover for Palestinian children being taught hate and to 'embrace death' is well known.

My professional opinion suggests that a process of cultural abuse has been perpetrated on the Palestinian children the same way that the Nazi propaganda machine abused the youth of Germany in the 30's. The world, much to the current shame of Europe, knows where that led. By the way, this I suggest also explains the virtually opposing public

opinion to the current Mideast conflict by the European and American media. America is not in the shadow of Europe's past, and, it seems, current reemerging shame.

I conclude that the term 'martyr' for the current generation of Palestinian homicidal-suicidal young people is a perversion of the term. Yes, the young people are victims, but not of Israeli policy. Instead, they are the victims of Palestinian terrorism, just like their Israeli victims. Both are victims of a mentality and policy of terrorism that has brainwashed the former to regard the latter as their 'enemy'.

My perspective would suggest these suicidal young people are victims of ideological indoctrination, rooted in Arafat's proven track record to avoid making peace at any price. Thus the need for scapegoating of Israel. That scapegoating process was also favoured by the Third Reich as its leaders perverted a generation of European youth to their, and their victim's destruction. The current tragedy, I suggest, partly arises from the fact the we have learnt so little about terrorism and the destruction they visit on their own populations, just as on their nominated 'enemy'. What are all the counter-terrorists doing at the moment? Please tell me, what are they doing to educate the world leaders to 'wake up' before it is too late?