
JUSTIFYING OCCUPATION: ISRAELI IMAGES OF "THE ARAB" AND THE DISCOURSE OF OCCUPATION'S LEGITIMIZATION

Yaacov Yadgar

Occupation needs to be justified, legitimized, so as to justify its apparent evils. It is simply too violent and unjust a reality to ignore and accept as "a given" or "obvious", especially when the occupied resists occupation, and demands acknowledgment of the wrongs inflicted on it. One (surely not the sole) way of justifying occupation is the imagery, symbolic construction of the occupied as not only deserving but even as calling for or needing occupation.

Such imagery construction consists mainly of (re-)presenting the occupied as an "Other", toward whom "we" should implement different criteria of judgment, understanding and identification than those we implement on our fellow, equal human beings. "We", in other words, *should* occupy them, since "they" are different from us in ways that not only threaten us, but also make their occupation by us their own redemption. To put it differently, somewhat more bluntly: we do them a favor when we occupy them. Under this construction, occupation then becomes not a violent act of negating freedom, but rather a benevolent act of redemption and liberation.

Edward Said's analysis (1978) is not the only, but surely one of the most convincing, analyses of the ways in which such construction of the occupied – the "East" in this case – is constructed by the occupier – the "West" – is positioned as what we can call, paraphrasing Said, "strategic inferiority" that not only justifies, but even necessitates the East's occupation by the superior West. That is, the West's superiority over the East not only legitimizes but even demands that the West occupies the East in the name of the most basic human values. After all, it redeems the East, bringing it the gospel of Progress, Modernity, and Humanism.

What I am interested in here are the ways in which the Israeli political culture legitimized, if not made necessary, the occupation of the Palestinians. I argue that an important organ of this legitimization discourse was the construction of "the Arab" as the Israeli ultimate, significant Other (TRIANDAFYLIDOU, 1998), whose culture, "collective traits" and "character" justifies, legitimizes and indeed, demands, that "we", Israeli Jews, occupy "them", the collec-

tive personified as “the Arab”. These “collective traits” of the occupied are of course highlighted by opposing them to the occupier’s identity as an enlightened and humane people.

I will also investigate the ways in which the Israeli political culture legitimized over time what at the beginning seemed like an impossibility: the rehabilitation of “the Arab” and the reconstruction of its image as to allow for negotiation and compromise with it. As I would claim, such rehabilitation did not consist of “understanding” that we were wrong and that images of “the Arab” were distorted, racist images, but rather on reconstructing what was later exposed as a fragile image of the Arab as renewing himself in our own image. In this way, peace and the compromise it necessitates are constructed not as an issue of confronting our notions and “otherness” but rather as an internal Jewish-Israeli issue, focused mainly on “us”. The end of occupation was thus justified not on the basis of realizing the evils of occupation (which are directed mainly but not solely towards the Arab), but rather on the basis of “our” own well being.

My analysis will be focused on the Israeli political discourse as it was constructed in the mainstream Hebrew press from 1967 to date.¹

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One possible starting point for my discussion can be the self-image of the Israeli collectivity as voiced in the articles of its spokespeople in the press. The self-image has continuously been one of a humanistic, peace-loving people. As put by one journalist, “We are a people that pursue peace. This is the one blessing, the most sacred and ancient of blessings, reserved for us.” (LEV, 1967a).

This same love of peace, inherent in the collectivity, is seen in this construct of identity as the basis for other key national values, such as national unity: “All amongst us carry peace in our hearts [...]. Divided we may be on almost every other question, but when it comes to peace – we, all of us, are one body and one soul [...].” (ROSENBLUM, 1977).

In this light, peace and humanism are presented as the guiding spirits of Israeli-Jewish political behavior, and serve as the prism through which to view Israel’s political and military moves and to explain the behavior of the individuals that make up the Israeli collectivity. In other words – it also explains why “we” occupy “them”.

Humanism and the pursuit of peace served again and again to demonstrate the sublimity and ethical uniqueness of “the People of Israel”. In the special context of war and violence, the image which served to express this symbolic system was that of the Israeli soldier as an “enlightened conqueror”, whose ethical behavior was guided by commitment to the “purity of arms”.

Thus, the exceptional ethics and humanity of the Jewish-Zionist state are reinforced by the very reality of occupation. This is done through the (re-)presentation of the moderate, positive, almost loving way in which the Jewish-Israeli soldier related to the Arab inhabitants of the areas conquered by the Israeli army during the Six Day War of 1967: “Israel’s army is not an army of conquest. The Israeli man is a good man, an ethical man, who loves his fellow-creatures, a conscientious man. He is a soldier returned from battle, whom the children of the conquered do not fear, around whom the children of the conquered cluster, smiling at him as he smiles at them; he mingles with men and women, they surround him with no fear, they talk to him about the lessons of the war – such a soldier is not part of an army of

conquest [...]. Who else has such soldiers, who fight like madmen, and bring flowers to children?" (KEINAN, 1967). Furthermore, as befits a trait planted in the nation by history, perhaps even by cosmology, this national morality is not an ephemeral thing: "It seems that the Jews will never succeed in becoming an army of conquest in the style we have known in other armies. Hidden within us is a fine thread that restrains us from any idea of brutality. Within us is a truth, the truth of a people that has learned by its own bitter experience, through years without end, what it feels like to be a refugee." (LEV, 1967b).

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The image of "the Arab" stands as the explicitly contrasting background, against which our image as an enlightened people is highlighted. By contrast to the violent image of the Arab soldier as a hate-filled beast which longs for violence, the Israeli soldier, the ultimate representative of the Jewish state, is presented as one who "[...] first and foremost, is loving. He loves his country [...] and the hope of his people," (BASHAN, 1967), and "makes it his business to bring justice and moral order into the lives of his enemies, too." (LEV, 1967b). Consequently, the victory of the Israeli army is the victory of "the might that represents justice" (*Ha'aretz*, 6 June 1967, p. 4). And the violent action of war becomes one more element to buttress the fact that "[...] its heart [of the Jewish people] is not given to vainglory, its heart is not given to the heady wine of might, [...] it wishes for peace, a true peace, not for armed glory. The people that gave birth to such an army, to such officers, is not militaristic. And this is one of its fine and wonderful characteristics." (EVRON, 1967; also EVRON, 1977).

This image of the Arab has been a mainstay in the repertoire of Jewish-Israeli national images. For example, studies of the image of Arabs in the eyes of Jewish-Israeli youth during the two first decades of Israel's independence found that the image held of the "Arab person" was explicitly negative: "very old, heavy, stiff, hard, ungrateful, egoistic, unpleasant, bad, colorless, out-of-date, ugly, twisted, low, slow, passive, unsuccessful, irrelevant, fickle and sentimental" (BENYAMINI, 1980). Against this image stood the "Israeli", the "new Jew", the antithesis of the Arab (BAR-TAL and ZOLTAK, 1989; BENYAMINI, 1969 and 1980).

One can hardly over-emphasize the place assigned to the Arab as an "other" in the Jewish-Israeli national identity construct as it appeared in the analyses of Israeli journalists during June 1967 and October 1973. The various writers meticulously charted the individual as well as collective and/or national characteristics of "the Arab", against which they reaffirmed and clarified the Jewish-Israeli collective self-image. "The Arab" in the Israeli press of this phase – a critical phase in the construction of a discourse that not only explains, but also justifies a reality of occupation – is first and foremost aggressive, driven by what seems to be an inherent destructive instinct that is directed towards the peace-loving Israeli (Jewish) nation.

The Arabs, "possessed by hatred and an extermination instinct", force their wars upon the Israelis-Jews, seeking to remove them from their rightfully owned land and altogether annihilate Jewish-Israeli national presence. The Arab enemy is but a new, updated version, of the gentile oppressor, equivalent to the Nazi exterminator.

Thus, for example, it was stressed that during the Six Days War the Arab armies had explicit plans to exterminate the state of Israel, massacre its inhabitants, and put them into gas chambers and crematories (SHAMIR, 1967); that the Arabs were motivated by "an actual endeavor

or to exterminate the last remnants from the Holocaust camps that gathered in Israel” (SELPATER, 1967); and that they were ready to use poisonous gas as a weapon against those who survived Hitler’s gas chambers (SELPATER, 1967). Therefore, the war between Israel and the Arab countries is not a “normal” struggle between states, but “a stage in the endeavors to exterminate the Jewish people, which are characteristic of our time.” (LIVNEH, 1973b).

In this framework of identity as a binary construct, the political reality is understood as one in which Jewish existence and Zionist nationalism collides with Arab nationalism in a zero sum game. “We”, a humanistic and peace-loving nation are unwillingly dragged into the war; but once we find ourselves there, we fight fiercely for our very right to exist: “Indeed, we did not want the war [...]. But once it was forced upon us by them, we must crush the skull of the Arab imperialist viper [...]. We are explicitly dealing with an attempt at genocide: their aim is to totally exterminate us.” (ROSENBLUM 1973).

And once “we” are drawn into this campaign against those who wish to push the regenerated Jewish nation back into the historical sequence of violence and abuse of the (old) Jew, we are enjoined to be as determined as possible: “[...] to break them. To forcefully hit, smash, eliminate, demolish and kill – in order to break the backbone of their national will. We must shatter the psychological shield that protects the Arabs from acknowledging Israel’s presence.” (LAPID, 1973). In contrast to the humane and gentle image of the Israeli soldier as an “enlightened occupier”, the image of “the Arab aggressor” (*Ha’aretz*, 6 June 1967, p. 1) embodies boundless viciousness, accompanied by explicit egoism and immorality, as befits his violent, tyrant character. Not only does he lack empathy or mercy for his rival; he also lacks this trait in his relations to his family, unknowingly forcing the Israeli soldier, the ultimate representative of the Jewish-Israeli nation, to take on the role of implementing universal justice and morality (LEV 1967b; AMIR 1967).

One of the most outstanding flaws of the Arab Other is his lack of a “Western orientation”, in contrast to the “natural” and successful integration of Israel into the modern West. This narrative-interpretive attitude found some of its most explicit expressions in a series of articles published under the title “We and the Arabs” (BAR-YOSEF, 1967a; 1967b; 1967c), in which the writer takes upon himself the task of analyzing “the Arab national character” as an instrument for interpreting political and historical reality. The main problem, explains the writer, is the collision between the healthy rational character of the Israelis and the romanticism and fantasy at the core of the pathologic character of the Arab: “The reality here is not that of Western rationalism. The Arab mind-set and the ways in which they react are totally different from those demanded by Western rationalism of every sober person.” (BAR-YOSEF, 1967a). Instead of complying with those dictates of logic, the “Arab character” is ruled by fantasy: “It is a very romantic character, subject to abstract concepts of family, tribal or national honor; these abstract concepts are much more important to him than any actual reality. [...] His imagination dictates his behavior. He does not correlate imagination with reality, but rather reality with imagination. In this sense, he is our complete opposite. His emotional life dictates everything. Honor, respect, pride (usually baseless), vengeance, etc. – all these are typical national characteristics, deeply rooted inside the heart of every Arab. [...] In order for him [the Arab] to accommodate to the demands of the modern market, he must go through a process that we, like the Europeans, have undergone for at least two hundred years. [...] Viciousness on the one hand and sentimentality on the other are the two axes of the experiential reality of the Arab soul.” (BAR-YOSEF, 1967a).

From this perspective, the war between Israel and the Arabs is a local manifestation of an all-encompassing war between two civilizations, one that accentuates the essential differences between “us” and “them” (HEFER, 1973). The struggle, which initially appears local and national, is in fact a universal struggle, in which the Jewish-Israeli nation functions as the spearhead of the civilized world against the Arab hordes (LIVNEH, 1973a). What started out by the killing of Jews is a harbinger of the coming violence directed against Western civilization.

The same dichotomy of Israel=modern West vs. Arab=backward East confirms the identity of Arab-Israeli citizens as members of an alien collective, among us yet foreign to us, a kind of (potential) internal-external “significant other”, whose unique encounter with progressive Jewish-Israeli society emphasizes the Arab backwardness. The following story of an Arab student, as told by one writer as a preface to her discussion on Arab-Israeli citizens, typifies this attitude: “He enjoys a stipend and is acquiring higher education for free, something he would never have dreamt of if the village [where he lives] had not been part of the State of Israel. He saw himself sitting in the library as an equal among equals [...]. Saw himself during the weekends in the beautiful houses [of his Jewish peers], filled with books and understanding. But he also saw himself going back to his village, to this awful bleakness, despite the electric lights, of binding tradition that forces him to marry Fatma, his ignorant cousin. He eats and enjoys the wonderful, intricate dishes his mother made for him, but misses the plates and flasks, forks, tablespoons and teaspoons [which he saw] in Jewish homes. And where would he go with all his education? [...] To raise the village up to the level of the Israelis – the whole village is not ready for this at all [...]. (ELYAGON, 1967).

If there is a single word that encapsulates the image of the Arab “other”, it is the seemingly innocent term, *fallah* (Arabic for farmer). Its connotations encapsulate the duality of the narrative attitude towards the Arab, in which the craving for authenticity, for the novelty of agricultural work and the unambiguous attachment to the Land of Israel collides against the loathing of the barbarism, primitiveness, viciousness and irrationality that are all assigned to the mythic character of the Arab “other” (KEINAN, 1967).

The supposed ignorance of the *fallah*, his enslavement to imagination at the expense of logic, also penetrates in images of Arab soldiers and Arab armies. And again these images are contrasted with the absolute superiority of their Israeli rivals. One writer, commentating on the Six Day War, informs his readers that “the amazing victory of the Israeli Defense Force over the Arab armies, which surprised the whole world and ourselves, would not have been so staggering and surprising had the viewers of this spectacle focused their thought on the nature and character of the Arab as an individual and as a group.” (BAR-YOSEF, 1967b). This is true since against “[...] an Israeli army organized in accordance with the finest modern technical thinking; against a commanding rank that is honest and loyal and purposeful and wholly dedicated to its calling; against a soldier who is consciously disciplined and marvelously coordinated in his martial organizational framework; against an excellent Israeli technician, who knows how to handle any complicated instrument with a touch and a sharp mind and methodical knowledge; against an Israeli reservist, who sees the full picture and its important details in sober eyes and based upon precise information; against the citizen who fought for his and his family’s life. Against all these stood [Arab] armies that were only nominally organized, in outdated patterns; corrupt commanders, who care only about themselves; a worthless technician who can not tell left from right due to the mysteries of modern-day

weapons technology; a stupefied soldier who does not comprehend what is happening around him and who lacks any notion of the overall picture beyond his place within it; a soldier who is fed by deceptive and baselessly arrogant propaganda; a soldier who truly does not know what he was fighting for.” (BAR-YOSEF, 1967b).

It should be stressed that this commentator, like his colleagues, does not consider his subject – the Israeli army’s success – to be the outcome of Arab negligence or any particular external obstacle. Rather, this victory is a profound articulation of the collective Arab persona.

Another image that arises as essential for the construction of the Arab Other is the well known “few against the many”. The quantitative advantage of the enemy has been repeatedly presented as the main factor explaining the relative success of the Arab armies during the Yom Kippur War. The Arab villain is described as engulfing the Jewish-Israeli nation from all sides, ready to storm the country in overwhelming numbers (DOR, 1973; *Ma’ariv*, 19 October 1973, p. 5). Obviously, the same unfair imbalance spotlights the Jewish-Israeli qualitative superiority over the swarms of enemy Arab soldiers of whose leaders are willing to sacrifice millions, to achieve their murderous aims.

Such an analysis of the military reality is based on the same pseudo-anthropological (not to say racist) “overall view” of “essential Arab traits” – which are synthesized within the image of the Arab soldier. The explanation of the relative success of the Arabs must thus be a quantitative one, since these “essential traits”, like any other law of nature, are unchangeable. *Fallahness* has always been the fitting title for this composite: “[...] After two weeks of fighting [in October 1973] it seems that there is no essential change in the essential traits, both positive and negative, of the Egyptian soldier, as we have come to know them [...]. On the positive side – he excels in physical shape, in the remarkable endurance of the *fallah*, and in noticeable discipline in obeying orders. On the negative side – he lacks sufficient personal intelligence, he is unremorseful, and dependent.” (SELPATER, 1973).

Other “essential traits” often mentioned by journalists are deceptiveness, inhumane viciousness, imbecility and even insanity (CAROZ, 1973; LIVNEH, 1973a and 1973c).

The Yom Kippur war – especially during its early stages, when the Arab armies gained some substantial victories in the battlefield – had a profound impact on the Jewish-Israeli collective identity. To ease the dissonance caused by the acknowledged success of “ragtag” *fallah*-soldiers an easy solution was found: this success was ascribed to an external force, the villain in the meta-narrative of the American-dominated West, the Soviets (GOLDSTEIN, 1973; TEVET, 1973; SHAMIR, 1973; SELPATER, 1973). However, the more significant implication of the dissonance discussed here is articulated in a second solution: a new hesitant show of respect towards the Arab, involving the implicit abandonment of Israeli contempt for him, a central element in the image of the Arab “other”. To a large extent, the image of the villain is further empowered, for he is now portrayed not only as quantitatively superior, but also as capable of running complex organizational endeavors and meticulously planned military maneuvers – for which he deserves the hesitant show of respect (HAVER, 1973; ZARAI, 1973; DAN, 1973).

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The peace process between Israel and Egypt, and Israel’s controversial war against the PLO in Lebanon are two of the major events (or processes) that spurred the weakening of Arab otherness. The confrontation with Arab willingness to make substantial concessions for peace and of Israeli overwhelming – but not unbeatable – military might, accelerated wide-reach-

ing processes that are generally assumed to have begun with the Yom Kippur War. These processes largely deal with the substantial weakening of some major cornerstones of the Jewish-Israeli collective worldview, including fundamental elements of its national identity and meta-narrative.

One of the most salient articulations of this identity crisis was the journalistic elite's difficulty – or even conscious refusal – to offer its readers an unequivocal hero, or a genuine “villain” in its coverage of the Lebanon War: Israeli soldiers, who traditionally personified national heroism, went through a process of “de-deification”, while the image of the Arab was going through a process of “de-demonization”.

Surely, several writers did try to preserve the known image and identify the Arabs as the ultimate “other”. Nonetheless, they assigned otherness mainly to the distinct and rather limited circle of Palestinian terrorist organizations, while refraining from tagging the entire Arab population as aggressors. In this framework, “the PLO assassins” (BE'ERI, 1982), “the murderers among the Arab students of Hitler” (ROSENBLUM, 1982) are presented as “the scum of mankind” (BE'ERI, 1982), spillers of Jewish blood who do not trample to hurt the young and innocent under the clogs of their struggle for national liberation. We are also told that as Arabs, the only language these terrorists can understand is brute force (SELPATER, 1982; HAELYON, 1982).

However, this voice, loud and clear as it was, was but one in a cacophony of voices, the vast majority of which negated in one way or another the otherness of “the Arab”. The war in Lebanon exposed two separate groups of Arabs: the PLO terrorists and inhabitants of southern Lebanon (including the Palestinian refugees), in whose backyard Israel's fight against the PLO was being waged. Many writers emphasized the distinction between these two groups; by sympathizing with the second group they furthered humanization of the Arab “other”.

Moreover, this “rehabilitation” of the Arab Other also influenced the image of the first group, the terrorists. Most journalists presented a somewhat more “neutral” stance, from which they were able to address “clean” issues such as the organizational structure of the PLO, its capabilities, and its operative efficiency in an allegedly professional, almost indifferent matter. Thus, for example, one military analyst praised “the PLO fighters” for showing “distinguishable bravery, cleverness, [and] resourcefulness in the battle field” during the Lebanon War (HAVER, 1982; see also CAROZ, 1982; COHEN, 1982; LEV, 1982; MOR, 1982).

The rehabilitation of the Arab “other”, a process closely related to the strengthening of humanism and universalism in the Israeli meta-narrative and collective identity, peaked as these values – under the label “peace” – became dominant in the national identity construct.

The signing of the Oslo accord can be viewed in the framework laid here as an articulation of this new valuative dominance, and of transformation of the Arab otherness accompanying it. In this spirit, Yasser Arafat and the PLO were also rehabilitated, under the banner of “you make peace with your enemies” (*Yediot Aharonot - Musaf*, 15 September 1993, pp. 12-13; see also GEFEN, 1993), in a process mainly aimed at compromise through overcoming past inhibitions (*Ha'aretz*, 25 August 1993, p. b1; ROSENBLUM, 1993).

Nonetheless, what is discussed here is not the emergence of a totally “new PLO”. Many journalists, seeking to present the PLO as an organization that had abandoned terrorism in favor of pursuing peace, chose not to ignore the organization's past image. They acknowl-

edged this image, stressed its components, and openly called for Israelis to abandon it; like all myths, this image was viewed as an obstacle to peace (SAMMET, 1993; SHALEV, 1993; PLOTZKER, 1993a and 1993b). Moreover, some writers even protested the foreign media's failure to identify the fundamental change that the PLO had experienced, in the face of the media's embrace of the violent (and deceptive) image of the PLO and its members: "the demonstrations, the incitements, the stones [thrown], the veils, the flag burning, and angered faces are all very photogenic. But this message is false." (PLOTZKER, 1993c; see also BECHOR, 1993; SHIFF, 1993).

The most common method of presenting the rehabilitated image of PLO members entailed their assignment to the "peace camp", the updated "us". Within the confines of this new image, PLO members (through the organization's leaders, with whom the journalists had established personal contacts) were portrayed as moderate, men of the future who had abandoned their violent past; people who truly longed for peace, believed in the present and the promise of the future, freed from the claws of history (KEINAN, 1993; ABRAMOVITCH, 1993; *Ha'aretz*, 2 September 1993, p. b1).

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The outbreak of the second *intifada* marked a sharp retreat from this discursive-representative imagery, as the PLO, as well as Arafat and the Palestinians as a whole, were "re-gaining" their image as an ultimate Other, who presents an existential threat to the Jewish-Israeli people. Israeli political culture was characterized by a reawakening of such images, as the horrifying pictures of terrorism dominated the public sphere. If anything, such a reawakening of these images of Arab otherness showed how fragile and fickle this "rehabilitation" of the Arab other is, or, to use the reverse view, how strong and predominant are the images of the Arab as an ultimate significant other.

The discourse surrounding Ariel Sharon's "disengagement" plan is telling in this sense. Only rarely was Israel's withdrawal from Gaza presented as an act of bringing an end to occupation in the name of righting its evils; the plan has not been advocated as a humane act of easing the pains inflicted on the Palestinians by the occupation. Instead, the disengagement was constructed as a security measure, driven mainly by the urge to distance – indeed, to disengage – "ourselves" from them. In this sense, the "disengagement" plan is a testimony not to Israeli culture's acceptance of its others, but as a unilateral move driven by the same old fear and disregard of the Arab Other.

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Notes

1. This paper draws on my previous research on Israeli political culture. See mainly Yadgar (2003a and 2003b).