

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION ON PALESTINIANS

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Introduction

My name is **Dr. Mona Abuhamda**, and I am a clinical psychologist based in McLean, Virginia, USA. Over the years, I have worked extensively with immigrants, refugees, and communities affected by systemic violence and political oppression.

This presentation will explore:

The defense mechanisms used by the perpetrators (Israeli Occupation) to justify and sustain oppression.

The psychological impact on Palestinians, including collective trauma, intergenerational transmission of distress, and internalized oppression.

The role of silencing and erasure in sustaining this system.

Empowerment through resistance (Sumud) as a critical means of psychological survival and healing.

By understanding these dynamics, we not only recognize the suffering endured but also highlight the resilience, dignity, and agency of the Palestinian people.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENSE MECHANISMS

Psychological defense mechanisms are unconscious strategies that protect individuals from anxiety and emotional distress by distorting reality, operating automatically without conscious control, and can be both beneficial and maladaptive depending on their use (Sigmund Freud)

CLASSIFICATION OF DEFENSE MECHANISMS

They are classified into primitive defenses, which are basic and often deny reality, and secondary defenses, which are more sophisticated and reflect higher levels of psychological health and maturity, with their development depending on an individual's emotional growth and coping experiences.

Types of Psychological Defenses used by Perpetrators (Israeli Occupation)

1. Rationalization:

Israeli authorities often rationalize military actions as necessary for national security. For instance, operations in Gaza are framed as self-defense against Hamas, which is portrayed as a terrorist organization threatening Israeli citizens. This justification minimizes the moral implications of military actions that result in civilian casualties and widespread destruction, allowing for continued aggression under the guise of protection.

Types of Psychological Defenses used by Perpetrators (Israeli Occupation)

2. DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender)

The DARVO strategy is evident in how Israeli officials respond to international criticism regarding military operations. They deny accusations of disproportionate force or human rights violations, attack the credibility of critics (including NGOs and foreign governments), and portray Israel as a victim of terrorism. This tactic shifts focus away from the suffering of Palestinians and frames Israel as the aggrieved party.

Types of Psychological Defenses used by Perpetrators (Israeli Occupation)

3. Self-Victimization

Israeli leaders frequently invoke historical narratives of persecution to justify current actions against Palestinians. They present themselves as victims of ongoing threats, such as rocket attacks from Gaza, which legitimizes military responses that disproportionately affect Palestinian civilians. This self-victimization fosters a narrative that overlooks the systemic oppression faced by Palestinians under occupation.

Types of Psychological Defenses used by Perpetrators (Israeli Occupation)

4. Projection

Israeli officials may project their own violent tendencies onto Palestinians, accusing them of inciting violence or terrorism while justifying their own military operations as necessary responses. This projection serves to dehumanize Palestinians and frame them as aggressors, thereby justifying harsh measures taken against them

Psychological Warfare and Media Narratives

Disolutionism: Constant denial of their suffering through media distortion.

Cognitive dissonance: Global audiences struggle with contradictory narratives.

Weaponized language: Palestinians are 'terrorists,' while Israeli actions are 'self-defense.'

Selective outrage: Disproportionate media coverage of Israeli vs. Palestinian deaths.

OTHER PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES

Othering

Othering refers to the psychological process of perceiving or portraying individuals or groups as fundamentally different and alien from oneself. This concept often manifests in social contexts where certain groups are marginalized or dehumanized based on characteristics such as **race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status**. By categorizing others as "**the other**," individuals can justify discrimination and exclusion. This process can lead to a lack of empathy and understanding towards those who are different, reinforcing social divides and conflicts.

OTHER PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES

Dehumanization

Dehumanization is closely related to othering and involves denying the humanity of individuals or groups, often reducing them to subhuman status. This psychological mechanism is frequently observed in contexts of war, genocide, or systemic oppression, where perpetrators view victims as **less than human**.

Dehumanization allows individuals to rationalize harmful actions against others by stripping them of their dignity and moral consideration. Research indicates that dehumanizing language and imagery can significantly influence attitudes and behaviors towards marginalized groups.

The Nakba and Ongoing Historical Trauma

The 1948 Nakba displaced over 750,000 Palestinians and destroyed 500+ villages.

Intergenerational trauma manifests as chronic grief, loss, and identity fragmentation.

Ongoing displacement reinforces statelessness and historical erasure.

Systematic denial of the Nakba continues through Israel's efforts to erase Palestinian history.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

Collective trauma stemming from chronic violence, loss, and displacement, which not only affects individual mental health but also undermines the social fabric, resulting in pervasive issues like depression and anxiety amidst a continuous state of trauma that blurs the lines between past and ongoing suffering. It is Not PTSD because there is no post (Dr. Samah Jabr)

The Psychological Impact of Gaza's Siege

Gaza functions as an 'open-air prison' under Israeli blockade.

80% of children in Gaza exhibit symptoms of severe trauma due to repeated bombardments.

Learned helplessness: Constant violence fosters psychological despair.

Mental health crisis: High rates of depression and suicide among youth and adults.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

Intergenerational trauma

Intergenerational trauma refers to the psychological and emotional effects of trauma experienced by one generation that are transmitted to subsequent generations, impacting their mental health and well-being even if they did not directly experience the original traumatic events

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

Internalized oppression

Where Palestinians may adopt negative perceptions of themselves due to systemic dehumanization by the occupying forces. This internalization can lead to low self-esteem, diminished collective self-confidence, and a pervasive sense of helplessness. The psychological impact extends beyond individual suffering; it disrupts community cohesion and undermines social norms, leading to a loss of identity and agency within Palestinian society.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

Cognitive Dissonance

The psychological discomfort that arises when an individual holds two or more conflicting beliefs, values, or attitudes, leading them to seek consistency by changing their beliefs or rationalizing their behavior.

In Palestinians, it is created by witnessing their suffering while being labeled as aggressors which can lead to confusion, anxiety, and despair.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

Manipulation of Reality

The narrative propagated by Israeli authorities can manipulate Palestinian perceptions of reality, leading to disillusionment and helplessness as they struggle to reconcile their lived experiences with the dominant narratives presented by media and political leaders.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

Self-Blame and Shame

Palestinians internalize blame for their circumstances due to the narratives pushed by both Israeli officials and media outlets that depict them as responsible for their plight, leading to feelings of shame and hopelessness

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT

Survivor's guilt

Among Palestinians in the diaspora manifests as a profound emotional distress stemming from the awareness of their relative safety and privilege, contrasted with the ongoing suffering and violence experienced by their kin in Palestine, leading to feelings of guilt and helplessness for not being able to assist those affected.

IMPACT OF SILENCING DISSENT

Fragmentation of Civil Society:

The systematic silencing of dissent undermines civil society organizations that play a crucial role in community cohesion and advocacy for rights.

By labeling these organizations as "**terrorist**" entities, authorities effectively dismantle platforms for dialogue and support, leading to increased isolation among activists. This fragmentation can heighten feelings of vulnerability and fear within communities.

Islamophobia and Anti-Palestinian Racism

Islamophobia and Anti-Palestinian racism are related but distinct issues.

Islamophobia frames Palestinians (and Muslims in general) as threats to justify repression.

Anti-Palestinian racism dehumanizes all Palestinians, including Christian and secular Palestinians.

Both forms of bigotry reinforce the justification for state violence and media bias.

ANTI-PALESTINIAN RACISM

NAKBA DENIAL

Denying Palestinian history or rejecting the rights of Palestinian refugees

FAILING TO ACKNOWLEDGE

Palestinians as an Indigenous people with a collective Palestinian identity, belonging, and rights

VIOLENCE

or justification of violence against Palestinians

DEHUMANIZATION

erasing the human rights and equal dignity of Palestinians

EXCLUDING

or pressuring others to exclude Palestinians or expressions of solidarity with Palestinians

DENYING, DISTORTING, OR SILENCING
Palestinian narratives



WHAT IS IT?

A form of racism that silences, excludes, erases, stereotypes, dehumanizes or defames Palestinians or Palestinian narratives. Anti-Palestinian racism is distinct from Islamophobia.

WHO IS AFFECTED?

Palestinians, those perceived to be Palestinian, and non-Palestinians who support Palestinian rights, of multiple religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Since many people who experience anti-Palestinian racism (APR) are not Muslim, addressing APR under Islamophobia excludes a significant number of those impacted, noting that all forms of anti-racist efforts can co-exist.

WHERE DOES IT OCCUR?

Anti-Palestinian racism is rooted in the systemic oppression Palestinians experience as a colonized people under Israeli rule, but it occurs globally, especially in countries that support the Israeli government to advance their own imperial interests.

WHAT ARE ITS EFFECTS?

Anti-Palestinian racism can cause physical, mental, and emotional harm to both those who experience it and those who witness it. Ultimately, it functions to justify and uphold systems of oppression, whether their manifestations are implicit or overt.

IMPACT OF SILENCING DISSENT

Fear and Self-Censorship:

The pervasive climate of fear leads many individuals to engage in self-censorship, avoiding discussions about political issues or refraining from activism altogether.

This self-censorship not only stifles personal expression but also diminishes collective action against injustices. As a result, the potential for community mobilization is severely limited, further entrenching oppressive conditions.

Empowerment Through Resistance: The Psychological Benefits (Sumud)

The concept of **Sumud** encapsulates the resilience of Palestinians under occupation, highlighting their steadfastness in preserving identity and culture amidst efforts to silence them. It reflects a dual commitment to enduring hardship while actively resisting erasure through cultural affirmation and community solidarity. As such, sumud remains a vital aspect of Palestinian identity and resistance against ongoing oppression.

Empowerment Through Resistance: The Psychological Benefits (Sumud)

Resistance serves as a form of psychological agency.

Acts of resistance—whether through cultural expression or political activism—serve as crucial mechanisms for reclaiming identity and fostering hope within the community.

Resistance can counteract feelings of learned helplessness by instilling a sense of purpose and collective efficacy. The authors assert that even small acts of defiance can repair emotional erosion caused by oppression.

Islamophobia and the Criminalization of Palestinian Resistance

The West demonizes Palestinian resistance as 'Islamic extremism.'

Anti-Palestinian racism intersects with Islamophobia, legitimizing state violence.

Palestinian political organizations labeled as 'terrorist' to prevent solidarity.

Dehumanization in political discourse normalizes Israeli violence.

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