

Segregating Gazans has made them easier to demonize

Separating Israelis and Palestinians has broken the bonds between us, making Gazans easier to target in the Israeli press

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A Palestinian woman looks at the Israeli 'security fence' in the West bank village of Masha. Photograph: Jamal Aruri/AFP

A stout sense of humour and self-irony is the least most Israelis expect of Gazans. It is certainly true today, when they are spoken of almost solely through the hyperbole of military commentators who jump frantically from discussing the Iranian threat to the danger that the tiny, overcrowded, impoverished and besieged enclave poses to the state of Israel, a global military power.

But that sense of humour is also lost in the victim-oriented Palestinian media reports or the militant statements of anonymous veiled speakers and lower-tier Hamas politicians of which the meagre Israeli media diet ordinarily consists.

Now we would struggle to understand stories such as the following anecdote, relayed to me by the Fatah activist Abu Mustafa. Thirty years ago, Mustafa was being tortured by an Israeli interrogator. "You must be getting a double salary," Mustafa told the oversized interrogator, who was stepping on his back and squeezing his arms. "How come?" The Israeli was surprised. "Because of your weight," said Mustafa, as he was struggling with the pain. According to this thin and shy man, the interrogator burst out laughing,

was unable to continue his chore and left the room. Did Mustafa want to mellow his own memory of the torture when he shared that story with me, or did his humour indeed reach home with his tormentor?

Even 25 years ago, the relationship between Gazans and Israelis was very different. Back then, Gazans were a reservoir of cheap labour and still flocked to the streets of Israeli towns – to be found in every restaurant, clothing factory, garage and construction site. How were they seen then by the ordinary Israeli? Were they mere functional shadows who disappeared in their dorm shanties? Dispensable ghosts? Savages? An Uncle Tom?

Then in 1991, Israel imposed the closure – an under-discussed policy of movement restrictions on Palestinians, especially in Gaza, which was gradually streamlined into the reality of a separate, cut-off entity that exists today.

It was in 1990 I started my professional "romance" with Gaza. I realised how poorly and inaccurately it was being portrayed. My late father, never a typical Israeli, concluded when he heard my reports: "Of course! A people who rebel are a beautiful people." A pinch of self-conscious romanticism on his part, but also a counter reaction to the general attitude. This was still the first popular uprising. The Gazans, until now a faceless group, started acquiring the generic title of "terrorists" among Israelis.

Yet even before 1991, notwithstanding the widespread exploitation of Gazan workers, the daily interaction between them and Israeli employers was rarely represented in the media.

Tragically, it was during and after the Israeli onslaught on Gaza in the winter of 2008/9 that I got another reminder of such past ties. A blacksmith who hurried to move his shop's equipment to a safe place was hit by an Israeli missile. Eight people, his sons among them, who were loading a truck with the equipment, had been targeted by military officers who deciphered the inspection drone footage and misinterpreted the elongated objects as "grad missiles" and not the oxygen jars that they were (a common, deadly mistake, by the way, during that attack). I had the impossible task of interviewing this broken man over the phone a day or two after. He quickly switched to Hebrew, telling me about the Israeli business partner he'd worked with for years. "Talk to him, he'll confirm that I am not a terrorist." He also told me that this ex-business partner wired him money following the attack. But when I called the Israeli man he refused to talk to me, because "he does not speak with traitors".

When I entered Gaza, a few days after the onslaught ended, I heard it over and over again, from people old enough to have worked in Israel and whose fields, houses and factories were just destroyed: they spoke warmly of their ex-employers and Israeli business partners who had just called them, worried about their plight.

The welcome astonishment with which such stories were received by my young editors told me yet again of how the strict policy of separation was bearing its fruits. Without any trace of ordinary human encounters left (since 2006 even Israeli journalists are barred from entering the Gaza Strip), Gazans have become abstract, almost extra-terrestrial, creatures. As such it is so much easier for officials, and some media mouthpieces, to stereotype and demonise. It is based on brusque and tawdry TV scenes, and makes Israeli video war-games, but with real fire, much easier.

- Comments on this article are set to remain open for 24 hours from the time of publication but may be closed overnight.

- Today the Guardian's [live blog on Gaza](#) looks at the impact that Hamas rule and economic and political isolation by Israel have had on Gaza's 1.7 million people.

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