

COMMENTARY

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The Dire Consequences of Revenge and Retribution

Alon Ben-Meir

New York University

A regular reader of my weekly column recently shared with me a commentary about the brutal murder of Dafna Meir, an Israeli Jew who was stabbed to death by a Palestinian teenager. Needless to say, there are no words to express the anger and revulsion over this atrocious crime—murdering an innocent woman with six children who had no malice in her heart against any Palestinian. It is rather natural to react with rage and venom, and what often comes to mind is revenge and retribution against the perpetrator for such a heinous, cold-blooded murder.

The writer states first that “My initial angry reaction was that we should kill 100 Arabs, 10 each for her, her husband, her children and her parents. But that would have little effect, since, as they [the Palestinians] often remind us, they love death as we love life.”

As horrifying as the tragic death of Dafna is, it is beyond comprehension that the writer’s first thought is to kill 100 Palestinians to avenge her. Since “Palestinians love death,” there would be no point in killing 100 Palestinians for one Israeli, because by his own logic they prefer death over life, and therefore the lives of 100 Palestinians are worthless. Instead, he advocates that “collective punishment is appropriate here because there is collective guilt. His [the criminal’s] village and his people praise terrorists and make heroes out of them.”

What is unfathomable is how revenge and retribution could presumably reduce the vicious cycle of violence that has been consuming both sides for nearly seven decades. The sentiment of this writer wanting to kill yet more innocent people stands in stark contrast to Jewish morals, pointedly expressed by the victim’s husband, who tearfully stated “I am not angry at anyone. We don’t fill ourselves with that. We don’t curse Arabs...we’re not people who hate.”

Just like Dafna's husband, the Palestinian father whose son, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, was kidnapped and burned alive in July 2014 by three Israelis, said: "They burned him [his son Mohammed] once, but we burn every day. My Jewish customers ask me if I hate them. I tell them I don't. I hate those who did this. I ask you to punish them in the most severe way."

The fact that these aggrieved persons—Israeli and Palestinian—could display such humanity and strength in a time of profound pain and agony should provide an example for all Israelis and Palestinians alike. Calling for collective revenge not only demonstrates the moral insolvency of this writer, but also invites other acts of revenge that will only leave behind more Jewish and Palestinian widowers and orphans.

By what moral standard can this writer justify the killing of hundreds of innocent Palestinian men, women, and children, even if they praised the killer for his atrocious murder? How would this writer react if the Palestinians murdered in cold blood one hundred Israelis because they cheered the killing of one Palestinian by an Israeli?

While the concept of death may be perceived differently among certain Palestinians, the writer completely disregards even the notion that a member of a Palestinian family—a husband, mother, son, or grandparent—is a human being who feels just as deep as any Israeli agonizing in pain and despair over the loss of a loved one.

This writer, like many other Israelis, conveniently ignores the fact that committing horrifying crimes is not an exclusive phenomenon to the Palestinians. What about the 21 year-old Israeli, Amiram Ben-Uliel from the West Bank settlement of Karmeit Zur, who threw a firebomb into a house while a family was asleep, killing an 18 month-old baby and his parents?

There are no words to adequately condemn the tragic kidnapping and killing of three Israeli teenagers in June 2014, which led to the horrifying revenge killing of Mohammed Abu Khdeir a month later. This senseless act of revenge only paved the way for Israel's incursion into Gaza, which resulted in more than 2,000 Palestinian deaths, massive destruction, and dozens of Israeli casualties.

These tragic events must also be seen in the context of the dangerously deteriorating relations between Israelis and Palestinians, and the corrupt leaders on both sides who are pursuing their political agendas by inciting the people against one another.

Tragically, these revenge killings are not limited to Israelis and the Palestinians who live in the West Bank, but are exported to Israel proper. As much as most Israelis sympathize with the settlers, Israeli Arabs also have a close affinity to their brethren in the West Bank and Gaza. The suffering and discrimination against one side only, because of who they are, has a direct impact on their counterpart.

However, by no means can this justify the horrifying murder of three Israelis in Tel Aviv in January 2016 by an Israeli Arab, Nashat Melhem from the Arab town of Arara in Israel.

Prime Minister Netanyahu is correct to say: “We will demand loyalty to the laws of the state from everyone. One cannot say ‘I am Israeli in my rights and Palestinian in my responsibilities.’ Whoever wants to be Israeli, must be Israeli all the way, with rights and responsibilities, and the first and foremost responsibility is to follow the laws of the state.”

Having said that, Netanyahu must also recognize that there is rampant discrimination against Israeli Arabs. Netanyahu and his followers cannot have it both ways. If he wants Israeli Arabs to assume their responsibility and adhere to the laws of the land, then he must also grant them equal rights not only by law but in their day to day encounters.

Any Israeli Jew or Palestinian, regardless of their place of residence (be that in the West Bank or in Israel proper) who wants to prevent this vicious cycle of revenge, must stop and think—where will all this lead to? Anyone who claims to seek a solution to the conflict must denounce in the strongest terms the cycle of revenge and retribution.

There is plenty of blame and counter-blame to go around. Both sides need to mutually understand the other’s pain, suffering, fear, and uncertainty, which is rooted in the accumulative agonizing experiences that both sides have endured and contributed to over the years, and continues to be inflamed by the naked, inhuman, and blind cruelty against one another in acts of revenge against innocent people.

When will ordinary Israelis and Palestinians realize that revenge does not offer a cure to the endemic conflict, but is a curse that will continue to haunt both sides from which only the gravediggers benefit?

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/the-dire-consequences-of-revenge-and-retribution/>

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. He is also a journalist/author and writes a weekly syndicated column for United Press International, which appears regularly in US and international newspapers. Email: alon@alonben-meir.com

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