[Ali Ahsan](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/ali-ahsan)

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**A triumphal return?**

As our foreign minister voiced unhelpful tropes on CNN, the broader point he struggled to drive home was instead on display in a shameful full-page ad targeting Bella, Gigi and Dua in the New York Times. It sought to conflate their support for Palestinian human rights and dignity with Hamas’ rule in Gaza.

The irony and hypocrisy are hard to escape. Hamas, of course, was midwifed by Israel – originally supported to undermine Fatah, and is today tolerated precisely because they are a convenient diversion – “but the terrorists! And their rockets!” – from the everyday degradations of the apartheid regime that the Dua-Hadids draw attention to.

That the Times published the ad is an indictment of the paper. But it’s also an indictment of a media ecosystem that is instinctively supportive and forgiving of Israel, and willfully exculpatory of its crimes. The cliché that ‘Palestinians (passively) die’ while ‘Israeli civilians – including a soldier – are (actively) killed’ is alive, and it is deadly.

Of course, this happens not because ‘Jews control the media’, as the minister would have us believe, but because the Jewish experience is interlaced throughout the western media and power ecosystems. When CNN’s Jerusalem correspondent tweets about her niece’s enrollment in the IDF, or New York Times columnist David Brooks’ son completes his service in the occupying forces, and when newsrooms from Los Angeles to London are full of people with ties – friends, family, nationality, visits – to the state of Israel, this is an inevitable outcome.

When decision-makers start with an instinctive belief in and sympathy for one side, you can try all you wish to be objective but the reality is you-will-be-biased. Your beliefs and biases shape your worldview, they determine your perspective. That is why the American media and political establishment desperately cling to the outdated and impossible ‘two state solution’. If you own the language, you control the narrative.

Truth is, the two-state solution has been a distraction now for far too long. It is neither possible at this stage nor preferable. Today, it is simply meant to buy Israel more time to effectuate more ethnic cleansing and more land grabs while keeping the focus on some political statehood aim as opposed to the inherent dignity and human rights of an oppressed population. The alternative is obvious – a single bi-national state, with equal rights for all.

If your starting point is instinctive support for Israel then this solution is unacceptable because it implies giving rights to all people there and thus sharing the Jewish state with non-Jews. But how do you oppose rights for the Palestinians in their own land, if you believe in democracy and human rights? The answer is to skirt the issue by shouting “two state!, two state!” at the top of your lungs as if that absolves everyone of talking about Palestinian rights (which will just magically be realized when this Palestinian state comes about on a tiny Bantustan in the middle of the West Bank).

The most promising development of recent times has been the buildup of a minimum (and hopefully growing) critical mass of voices for Palestine. From the Hadids to the Squad to even American sports stars like Kyrie Irving and Damian Lillard, there are now enough voices speaking up that it’s hard to single out and silence them.

The apartheid state’s most successful action has been to destroy (figuratively and at times literally) all critical voices (see, eg, Corbyn, Jeremy). Pick them off quickly and decisively. And send an unmistakable signal to one and all of the price to be paid for speaking up on the issue. That’s become much harder now. In numbers there is strength and in strength there are numbers. It’s hard to simply ‘Susan Sarandize’ everyone.

This is where ill-considered remarks like the minister’s are unhelpful. They enable a tired and overplayed narrative that criticism of Israel is unfair, conspiratorial and anti-Semitic. They allow Israel’s sympathizers to play offence when they are otherwise on deep defence.

The minister’s heart was obviously in the right place. But is it too much to ask that his preparation match the moment as well – are we destined to wing it even on the most visible of platforms (CNN) on the most global of stages (UN)? And what of the triumphal return? If we offer garlands on landing for such publicly broadcast failure, what rose garden will we have to pillage for an actual victory?

Dua Lipa is not apologizing. The Hadids obviously won’t either. Indeed, the Times’ ad reeks of desperation. And one day, it will surely be a featured exhibit in museums chronicling Israel’s apartheid, and America’s complicity. And when that history is written, let the footnote on Pakistan be not about the gaffes of our government but the principled passion of our populace.

The writer, a former aide to UN Secretaries-General Kofi Annan and Ban Ki-moon, tweets at @aliahsan001