**Normalizing apartheid**

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The international community was jolted, halted, dismayed and alarmed by the sudden news of Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh’s death by an Israeli sniper in Jenin.

The news coverage, the outcry and the nature of the cold-blooded murder managed to momentarily shift the world’s disproportionate fixation on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as other global conflicts continue to wreak havoc on humanity. Her role as a journalist highlighting the atrocities committed by Israeli forces led to her demise as the perpetrators sought to normalize the occupation of Palestinian territories by muzzling out freedom of speech once again. Here lies the truth.

As the old adage from French poet Jean Cocteau goes: “True realism consists in revealing the surprising things which habit keeps covered and prevents us from seeing.”

The second part of this adage is important while analyzing Akleh’s death at the hands of Israeli forces. ‘Habitual behavior’ or ‘habit’ in this case entails states, entities, politicians and demagogues preventing voices covering egregious human rights violations amid racism and state sponsored terrorism from reaching the global audience. In Shireen’s case, it must be considered habitual for the Israeli government to target voices of reason which seek to resist its decades old state sponsored policy of apartheid against occupied Palestinians.

To illustrate, the reaction of the IDF and Knesset to the murder was a deliberate attempt to twist the narrative and absolve itself from culpability by adding an element of obscurity regarding the cause of Akleh’s death. The disinformation campaign unleashed by the Zionist regime managed to echo in global capitals and was reiterated by some of Israel’s staunchest supporters, including US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price. As international journalists railed against the spokesperson’s remarks in the aftermath of the killing his response was to claim that the US has utmost trust in the accountability process initiated by the IDF. Utmost trust in perpetrators seeking to stifle voices through force is perhaps what was meant.

To officially side with the narrative of the oppressor and muzzle dissenting voices of the oppressed, serves as a reminder that Akleh’s death translates into freedom of speech continuing to be mercilessly suppressed by governments, entities and systems sanctioning oppression. The modus operandi of the Israeli government actually mirrors pre-1994 South Africa, where the then white minority government monopolizing resources in occupied territory would prevent the stories of oppression or resistance in segregated areas and Bantustans from reaching the international audience. Those revolting through peaceful protests would be met with crackdowns from the apartheid state, as witnessed during the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. The difference between then and now however was that South Africa witnessed an economic and political boycott by the overwhelming majority of the international community who refused to recognize the white minority government for its crimes against humanity.

Fast forward to 2022, and Israel continues to operate with impunity with mild condemnation not translating into concrete action or accountability. It is with this historical baggage that voices such as Shireen Abu Akleh were silenced because they brought the truth before international viewers in a land witnessing the proliferation of illegal Jewish settlements, international apathy to the plight of Palestinians and the weaponization of Zionism from the Knesset. For a country which touts itself to be a democracy and brandishes its image of being a harbinger of freedom of speech, Akleh’s murder demonstrates the narcissistic approach adopted by the Israeli security apparatus against voices of truth.

While working for Al Jazeera Arabic, Shireen exposed the violence perpetrated against the occupied force during the Second Intifada which saw Israel employing gunfire, aerial bombings and provocations with impunity as provacatuers such as former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon visited the Al Aqsa compound to ignite religious tensions. The ensuing 3,000 Palestinian deaths including that of a boy sheltering behind his father in the Gaza Strip to fight for freedom were stories which Abu Akleh’s reporting encapsulated for a more informed audience. Her work was an alternate and correct view of the war crimes committed by a state sponsor of apartheid instead of a Jewish democratic state seeking to defend itself.

It was also during her 2005 interview of incarcerated Palestinian prisoners at the Shikma Prison that she attempted to uncover how inmates could possibly have been subject to sham trials and wrongful detentions. The result was the IDF seeking to target her on the premise of photographing security areas at the Shikma Prison. This was not about photographs by picturing and filming reality.

In 2022 not much has changed in Israel, its demagogic approach or its stifling of dissent through force. It has actually worsened with a series of right-wing, far-right governments coming to the helms of policy making over the past few years who have attempted to normalize oppression.

From the Naftali Bennet administration to his predecessor Benjamin Netanyahu, Zionist supremacy has been used as a policy tool to both expand domestic political clout and to carry out armed operations against a population not equipped to respond proportionally with impunity. This includes the 2021 Israeli Palestinian crisis which was triggered by unrest in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood with far-right bigots such as Itamar Ben Gvir advocating for apartheid unleashed on the local population. A year later, Shireen was found unveiling the truth of Israeli oppression as the IDF raided a house in Jenin when an incoming sniper led to her demise. Her injured producer Ali Samoudi corroborated the claims of witnesses that Israeli forces killed her. Nothing more is closer to the truth.

There can, hence, never be any moral or false equivalence on Shireen’s murder where the Israeli narrative is considered equally accurate or sacrosanct. Advocacy for the rights of Palestinian people as freedom of speech by figures such as Shireen was stifled deliberately to ensure that Israel’s war crimes as a source of international embarrassment never come to the fore. This is precisely why the Israeli army chief, Aviv Kochavi, claimed that it was difficult to determine the exact cause of her death or how Palestinian militants could be responsible instead.

The truth is that the occupation is in place, apartheid is being sanctioned and independent voices of freedom are being deliberately targeted through state sponsorship. That explains her demise.

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