

The Zionist Espionage Debacle - An Obstruction to Women Right's in the Middle East

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On International Women's Day, there's a great deal that one should say. As women, certainly, this is a time for reflection on the progress our social movements have made, and on their capacity to contribute to political change.

It's that time of year when social media bustles with events that campaign for women rights and further press for progress. But something else seems to be gripping Beirut nonetheless.

For the past week, the Lebanese have been engaging in what one person put it, a "spitting game," over who is an Israeli spy and who isn't. A senior Lebanese security officer was arrested for having orchestrated a scheme accusing local actor Ziad Itani of cooperating with and spying for Israel. Lebanese authorities claimed that Itani was recruited by a female Mossad agent requesting he contact senior Lebanese political officials in order to advance normalization with Israel. The news created a shock wave as no one really believed the likelihood of Itani being involved in such a plot and were rather suspicious about the different forces that were at play. More troubling, if not proven otherwise Itani could be facing the death sentence. Lebanon and Israel are in a state of war and collaborating with the latter is considered legally, a crime punishable by death.

Syrian acclaimed playwright Saadallah Wannous once said "in the name of Israel, Arab regimes ruled us." Wannous belonged to a generation of vanguard Arab intellectuals and artists whose political and artistic self-understanding was moulded by the question of Palestine. In a 1990s documentary film by Omar Amiralay, he spoke of the oppressive situation that the Arab world has come to following the occupation of Palestine and the 1967 Defeat. The events brought enormous suffering for the Palestinian people and those living in Middle East as a whole. Aside from the wars that had devastated people's way of life, it gave way for incompetent Arab regimes to exert rule in the manner and fashion which they have for decades. Under the pretext of war with Israel, dictatorships were set up, law enforcement strengthened, and security apparatuses established so as to leave no space for civilians to question these governments' authority. Any movements calling for change and reform was considered a threat to the stability of a nation in war with the enemy, a threat deserving of punishment. This message has fallen on fertile ground in Syria and Lebanon in recent years as opposition groups continue to be marginalized and the established political forces rotten to the core and hopelessly factionalized with a legal framework that continues to support government repression.

The Syrian republic is one example of an Arab dictatorship whose constitution masked the true face of an authoritarian monarchy that legislated its powers with a vicious "emergency law." Syria's emergency law was put into effect when the Baath party came into power following a military coup in 1963. The law gave the government unlimited authority to restrict individual freedoms and to investigate and detain suspects when national security and public safety were deemed to be at risk.

The government had long maintained that these measures were necessary to defend Syria against plots by its rival in the region, Israel. In practice however, they were only used to protect single-party rule by empowering its security forces that harassed, incarcerated, and killed activists and political dissidents critical of the Assad regime and curtailed activities of advocacy organizations and human rights campaigners. When the pro-democracy protests opposing the rule of Syrian President Bashar al Assad erupted in March 2011, demonstrators demanded the immediate annulling of the law that had supported the regime's repression for decades. In a move to appeal to the international community the government made cosmetic changes: it announced an ending the state of emergency but passed new measures that criminalize public protest that allegedly threaten stability. As a result, security forces continued to use lethal force against demonstrators and waged a campaign of arrests that captured tens of thousands of people under the excuse that they belonged to terrorist groups supported by Israel as part of a campaign to topple Assad.

Under this very pretext, the regime and its allied forces are carrying out one of the deadliest assaults in the history of the Syrian war against 380 000 civilians trapped inside the besieged enclave of Eastern Ghouta while the world stands by, idle and debilitated. The densely populated area just outside Damascus has been under siege for the past five years enduring continuous bombings and the deployment of incendiary, cluster and chemical weapons. With 17 resolutions, the UN Security Council has been condemning the regime's continuous breach of international law while Russia's obstructionism has repeatedly thwarted any attempt to stop the war. The Security Council's big five permanent members, Russia included, wield huge influence and too often, self-interest outweighs considerations of the greater good. The very system we set in place in 1945, the United Nations to save future generations from the scourge of war by political means, seems to have only strengthened the resolve of powerful member states that have instead, instilled militarism as a way to resolve conflict.

Militarism needs a particular type of masculine identity. It feeds on masculine violence and elevates it in order to sustain it. In order to portray itself as a model of modernity, these regimes bring in women who support it. Two years ago, Assad created the first brigade of female commandos in the loyalist Syrian Republican Guard that included 800 female soldiers who reportedly fight along the borders of Damascus. The move is no more than a propaganda tool more so than an actual attempt to swell the army ranks with women who are capable of succeeding in all sectors. The war in Syria is portrayed as a face-off between two societal structures, a secular one and a jihadist one, and Assad is showing that in his system, women have an important role. As women we should be promoting equality and peace. Feminism is supposed to lead to an end to violence not encourage women to come in and perpetrate violence as well. Moreover, the emancipation process is far from complete and aside from the display of women in uniforms, gender discrimination is still widespread in Syria. Women issues are seldom seen as important and pressing. They are most often considered luxury rights and colorful topics to address when it serves regime interest. Syrian laws continue to perpetuate discrimination. No feminist association calling for women's rights has ever been authorized. For almost fifty years, none of the hundreds of anti-women legal articles have been amended. To this day, women cannot transmit their Syrian nationality to their children and honor killings are not considered serious crimes but only mere misdemeanors. And even though the regime presents women in decision-making posts they have nonetheless voted unanimously to uphold Syria's reservations to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) against their very interests and in favor of their disadvantage.

Furthermore, the Assad regime has committed gross infringements against Syrian women whereby it arrested and tortured thousands of them, both civilians and activists, before and after the revolution. The war prompted millions of people to flee their homes and a majority of them have been women and children. UNHCR estimates that of the total number of refugees created, women

comprise 48.5% of them with around 30% between the age group of 18 to 59. Early in the conflict, the International Rescue Committee issued a report explaining that rape, or the fear of it, was a main reason why Syrian families were fleeing the country. History has always been witness to the use of gender based violence in conflict situations as a weapon of war and Syrian women too have fallen victims of sexual violence frequently perpetrated within their homes or in detention. A lot has been said about the gender aspect of conflicts in Bosnia, Rwanda, or the Democratic Republic of Congo, but the gender aspect of the ongoing Syrian conflict remains under-reported due to the social taboos that surround it. In 2013, G8 foreign ministers adopted a declaration pledging to work together to end sexual violence in areas of conflict and announced an initiative to prevent rape, protect civilians and rape survivors, and to persecute those believed to be responsible for the crimes. But in order for trials to occur, the UN Security Council must pass a resolution requesting an investigation on Syria at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and given the current impasse with Russia continuously blocking UN Security Council decisions, this is unlikely to happen. The UN's increasing helplessness in the face of Syria's human catastrophe is not only matched by the abject failure of its peacemaking efforts but also its inability to bring perpetrators to justice in the future.

In a manner of speaking, all is not well here in this part of the world. The prospects of what one would consider a good life seem quite dim from where I'm standing, more like a long dark corridor without an end. The people have become so vulnerable; they believe that the world is indifferent to their plight. From Palestine, to Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, civilians continue to pay the price of instability. Suicide, homicide and sexual violence are on the rise, accompanying prolonged poverty and malnutrition. Amid their unheard outcries, the news suggests that there may even be more suffering to come. US President Donald Trump has declared that it is time to recognise Jerusalem as the Israeli state's capital and recently announced that the US embassy is expected to move its location from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on May 14th this year. The date coincides with the day Palestinians and the Arab World observe the "Nakba" the day of the "catastrophe" a tragic day in Palestinian history. The move is not only an act of cruelty thus adding insult to injury but a greater opportunity for Arab regimes to further strengthen their resolve by instilling more fear about what's to come.

Fear is what these regimes thrive on. Fear of annihilation, fear of the enemy, fear of the other. Israelis are afraid of Arabs, Arabs are afraid of the West, the West is afraid of refugees, Christians are afraid of Muslims, Sunnis are afraid of Shiites, and the list goes on. There will be no space for celebrating our differences and diversity as it is expected that one group will continue to fear the other. These regimes will capitalize on these fears by further instilling dualisms only to prolong their own existence. The more fear there is, the more protection that is needed, and in the absence of a system that can protect human lives from the scourge of war, the more militarization will be presented as the viable solution. Nation's political economies feed on weapons. It is estimated that our governments collectively spend around 1.5 Trillion USD per year on defense. With that kind of money we could end extreme hunger, we can educate children, and we could address gender equality and climate change. The money is there, we have it, and we could do it, if there is a will.

After the June defeat suffered by the Arab armies against Israel in the 1967 war, Wannous' literary work turned inwards focusing on social structures, culture, and values. He moved beyond the analyses restricted to the political surface and turned towards self-understanding. If I were to muse on Wannou's work, I would suggest that maybe one place to start as individuals, is to uphold values that are intrinsic to the human condition and to stop falling victim to fear and dualism. To stop 'othering' people as means to strengthen our resolve and give meaning to our own existence while we avoid the real question we face as humans: "Where do we come from and where are we going?" If fear is to prevail then let the fear be that which unites us and not which that separates us pushing our agenda towards a more understanding way of life and peaceful coexistence.

Now back to the espionage debacle, Itani proved to be innocent as it was reported that he had been forced into confession under torture during his time in detention. The former Lebanese officer had hired a hacker to forge conversations between the actor and a supposedly Israeli agent in a revenge scheme. The former Lebanese officer was a woman, a one of a first to assume such a position within the Lebanese internal security forces. Simone De Beauvoir reiterated that the point of feminism and the fight for women's rights is not simply to take power out of men's hands and assume their positions. That wouldn't change anything about the world. It's a question precisely of destroying that notion of power.

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