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Live From Gaza: A New View of Israel

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SOMETHING strange happened last week: Israeli settlers and Jewish extremists appeared human on Arab TV. This is not to say that Arabs have suddenly become soft on their historical enemies. But hours and hours of watching - on all stations, including Al Jazeera - close-ups of mothers and babies, of young women and older men, visibly in anguish as they were forced out of their homes, had an emotional effect.

Of course, Palestinians didn't miss the context. Talk in our living rooms and over Turkish coffee at the office has been mixed: "Do you think they were acting?"; "Anyway, they were illegally on our land"; "Imagine what Palestinian refugees felt as they were being forcibly evicted years ago"; "What about the 120 homes in Rafah that were razed a few months ago?"; "Where was the world press as Palestinians were killed, often by these same settlers?"

Surprisingly, the coverage on Arab news networks has reflected these contradictions. One Arab reporter on the scene asked his anchor back in Dubai, "Did you see the soldiers crying?" Another network countered such images with an interview with the parents of Muhammad al-Dura, the 12-year-old boy who was photographed dying in his father's arms in 2000 and whose image has become a symbol of the intifada. But for the most part, the language on the broadcasts has been accurate and straightforward.

Even the largest Palestinian newspaper, Al Quds, had to deal with the emotional aspect of the evacuations. It carried an editorial on Thursday about the effects of the images of settlers crying and Israeli soldiers embracing them. It concluded that such scenes could have been avoided had Israel not grabbed Palestinian lands in the first place. Of course, Al Quds was correct in pointing out the obvious context - but this didn't lessen the way the pictures affected average Palestinians.

The Gaza evacuations also produced many interesting comparisons. Many Palestinians compared the kid-glove treatment given to the protesting settlers (who will be handsomely compensated) with the violent response to even peaceful Palestinian protests. And the much-shown clip of an Israeli father lifting his young daughter into the faces of emotionless soldiers reminded many of Palestinian mothers lifting their young sons in the air and publicly calling on them to avenge the deaths of a brother or a father.

The comparative images of religion were also evident. Fanatic Islam was mirrored by fanatic Judaism. One CNN reporter even had a slip of a tongue, mistakenly saying that settlers holed up in a synagogue were in a "mosque."

Then there was the common dynamic of minority factions monopolizing political discourse. Just as with the exaggerated political powers that Palestinian militants enjoy, it was clear that a few fanatic Jews were hijacking the anti-evacuation cause - note that the last protesters to be removed have been nonresidents dragged from synagogues in which they probably had never worshiped.

Whether Palestinians and Arabs will admit it or not, the powerful images of the last few days can't be ignored. Irrespective of the facts that Jewish settlements are illegal and that the Palestinian refugee problem was created by Israeli military force, the human cost on both sides of the conflict is huge. While not agreeing with either the settlers or the actions of Palestinian militants, the rest of us must start understanding and respecting them as humans. And it would help if the international news media began portraying ordinary Palestinians, too, with a touch of humanity.

Any sane person should by now realize that any long-term solution can only be achieved by level-headed leaders who can make mutual compromises and concessions. This means that continued Israeli unilateralism will do little to move the post-Gaza peace process forward. Only bilateral Palestinian-Israeli talks, with the help of the international community, can bring a lasting agreement.

The dramatic scenes from Gaza should lead us all to double our efforts to ensure that Palestinians can be free in an independent state, alongside a safe and secure Israel.

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