

## A boy is dead, now find the culprit

Monday, October 02, 2000 (Cyberia Editorial Team)

by Chibli Mallat

That picture is too much. The terrorised boy huddling behind his father, and then death. This is too much for "civilisation" in the year 2000.

Of course, other images which will be fixated in our soul for decades to come are no less dramatic - the picture of the naked child crying on the ricefield road sometime during the napalm bombing of Vietnam, or the haggard looks of survivors of Nazi camps.

Of course, the killing of that boy is just one event which the luck, or bad luck, of a nearby television camera has been allowed to demand its awful place in humankind's memory.

Of course his death is but one further tragedy in a long, interminable list of innocent victims in the Arab-Israeli conflict, itself the result and focal point of so much more violence on the planetary scale, to be added to the legacy of colonial Zionism in Palestine and the Holocaust in Germany.

Of course the apportionment of blame is complicated and endless in the 21st century.

Was it all Ariel Sharon's fault? Was that septuagenarian warrior parading at the Mosque just to say he is boss in great Israel or inside a Likud to which his competitor Netanyahu is threatening a comeback?

Or is it Barak's lackluster leadership which is incapable of steering the negotiations into a peaceful Jerusalem for all?

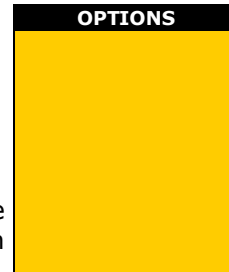
Is it Yasser Arafat's forgetfulness that his mandate to preside over the Palestinian Authority has run out, resulting in his wish for street violence to make up for failed legitimacy?

Or is it Hamas fanning street violence to regain the initiative after four years of defensiveness about the counterproductive and hollow bombs in Tel Aviv in April 1996?

Is it an American lame-duck leadership, incapable of producing international law principles to force upon the two parties, and resistant to any role for Europe in the Middle East process?

Or is it the Arab leaders, "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" ? The apportionment of blame is endless, and it is all to be shared, with varying intensities. But this terrorised boy bringing up into our soul the image of a Cordelia in King Lear, what can one do about it?

OPTIONS



As more violence unfolds in Palestine-Israel, we need the killer to be arrested. The place of this boy's death is known, soldiers must have been there, Palestinian or Israeli, no matter, commanders in the region must have been giving orders. The soldier who pulled the trigger should be identified and arrested, until a commission of enquiry is established, either on the Israeli side, as in the Sabra-Shatila Kahane Commission, or a joint Palestinian-Israeli one, or an international one, UN or otherwise.

There are precedents, even on an individual scale like the present one: in May 2000, in south Lebanon, an innocent Lebanese driver was killed by a trigger happy Israeli soldier. Again, chance had it that he was a driver for the BBC, and that a team of Amnesty International was in south Lebanon to monitor precisely this sort of excess. The conjunction has led to a process of accountability, which is ongoing even though imperfect.

A similar measure should be taken for the death of this boy, and should start with the arrest of the most immediate culprit, the soldier or soldiers who shot him, even if his trial could lessen some of the weight in this wicked act on account of the wider circumstances.

Of course, this will not be enough. The process of violence and accountability is a much larger one in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the writing and rewriting of its history is just starting. Of course the arrest and the enquiry will not bring a 12-year old to life.

But for that boy's death, something must be done. For our own peace of mind, we must not sit there and simply lament it on account of the cruelty of history. We will not return this boy to life, to his aggrieved family, but we simply cannot leave this home-brought crime without an account. The arrest is the first, immediate step for serious accountability. Without accountability, which results in the indictment and trial of the monster who shot the bullets that terminated that innocent boy's life, this picture will be the final testimony of man's immense cruelty in a horrible, monstrous, uncivilised century.

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