Opinion



Palestinians wait to receive aid at a United Nations food distribution center in the Al-Shati refugee camp in Gaza City Jan. 22. (CNS/Reuters/Mohammed Salem)



by Michael Sean Winters

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I am accustomed to disagreeing with the writings about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict offered by Ra'fat Al-Dajani. But his latest commentary is so outrageous, it demands a response.

The thesis of Al-Dajani's essay is that Israel still does not enjoy the peace and security it sought when it was created in 1948, this lack is on account of its occupation of Palestinian land and refusal to allow Palestine the full attributes of sovereignty, and that this occupation is only made possible because the Israelis systematically "dehumanize" the Palestinians.

Al-Dajani claims there are "three basic tenets that allow Israelis to both justify and ignore an occupation unprecedented in modern times in terms of its length and oppression." Before we get to the three tenets, I would point out that my late, beloved grandmother was Polish, but if you look for her hometown of Grodno on the map, you will see it is now in Belarus, not Poland. That is to say, in the wake of World War II, there were many peoples who were displaced, many lands that were occupied. Arab complicity with the Nazis did not help them in the post-war negotiations, where they tried to prevent the United Nations from partitioning Palestine into two states. And, when they failed to prevent the partition ordered by the U.N., they did not accept a peaceful settlement but, instead, declared war on the Israelis and sought to drive them into the sea. Everywhere else, people got on with their lives.

I would note in passing, as well, that between 1948 and 1967, the lands of the putative Palestinian state Al-Dajani thinks was unfairly blocked by the Israelis were not, in fact, occupied by the Israelis. The Hashemites in Jordan controlled the West Bank (and eventually expelled the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Mr. Arafat), and Gaza was controlled by Egypt. It is the kind of complicating fact propagandists like Al-Rajani prefer to ignore, but a fact it is. He also imparts something less than the whole truth when he states that in 1967 "Israel attacked Egypt and Syria first." Surely he knows that the Israelis received a leaked tape recording of a meeting of Arab leaders in 1965 at which they planned their attacks on Israel, that Syria had been shelling Israeli towns in the years leading up to the

war, that Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser had blockaded the Straits of Tiran, an act of war, that both the Egyptian and Syrian armies had mobilized along their borders with Israel, and finally that Nasser ordered the U.N. peacekeeping troops in the Sinai, who had been there for more than 10 years, to leave in the weeks before the war, thus leaving the way open to strike Israel. In what meaningful sense of the word "first" did Israel attack first?

The first tenet Al-Dajani cites is "the belief that Israelis are the 'chosen people' and ipso facto, the Palestinians are not. This principle allows the justification of uprooting and denying the rights of the Palestinians who have continuously lived on the land for a couple of thousand years. Israelis are chosen so their right supersedes that of Palestinians." Christians, too, believe that the Jews are the chosen people of God. But, more critical to understanding how facile Al-Rajani's suggestions are is this fact: Most orthodox Jews opposed the creation of the state of Israel. Or this fact: The drafters of the Israeli Declaration of Independence discussed whether or not to mention God explicitly in that text. They decided not to mention the Almighty but instead inserted the vague phrase "Rock of Israel," which could be understood in a religious sense or not. True, some quarter of a million Jews came to Israel shortly after 1948, and many of them were religious Jews. Why did they come? They had been expelled by Arab countries.

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The second tenet that allows Israel to maintain its occupation according to Al-Dajani is "the portrayal of Israel as 'the victim.' " I am sure to Palestinians, Israel seems like anything but a victim. But Israel was surrounded by hostile countries that attacked in 1948, 1967 and 1973. Only in 1977 did Anwar Sadat make his way to Jerusalem and begin to make peace with Israel, a peace that has lasted despite changes of government in both countries. In 1994, Jordan and Israel signed a peace treaty: Hezbollah marked the occasion by launching rocket attacks on Israeli towns in Galilee. During the First Iraq War, in an effort to stem the U.S. invasion, Saddam Hussein sent his Scud missiles into Tel Aviv, in an effort to ignite pan-Arab solidarity. So, setting aside entirely the Shoah, and the moral authority that catastrophe gave to Jewish alarm, Israelis have had good reasons to see themselves as surrounded.

It is the third of Al-Dajani's tenets that is the most reckless. "The third, and most insidious tenet, is the systematic dehumanization of the Palestinians," he writes.

"Dehumanization of Palestinian society at large, and Palestinians as individuals, allows Israel to justify its oppressive treatment of the Palestinians who are under its control."

One can excuse a lack of evidence for a small accusation — "he is so unpleasant," for example. But to charge Israelis, of all people, with dehumanization takes more than chutzpah. It requires evidence. This he does not provide. He links to an article in Haaretz about some liberal professor. He links to a report from Amnesty International, an organization which, on the subject of Israel, has as much credibility as the late Cardinal Bernard Law had on child protection. The report highlights excessive use of force by Israeli security forces, but neither the report nor Al-Dajani mention that last year an Israeli court convicted an Israeli soldier of manslaughter in one such incident, which is more justice than our U.S. courts could achieve for Trayvon Martin. He cites some regrettable comments from a police chief.

Dehumanization, to some degree, accompanies almost all human conflicts. It is shocking to our ears to hear what Franklin Roosevelt and his colleagues said about the Japanese after Pearl Harbor. I recall a woman friend who discovered her husband cheating on her, and while she had some choice language for him, it was the other woman who bore the brunt of her dehumanizing language. Dehumanization cannot be excused when it is episodic and understandable, even expected to some degree, but it is not a source of civilizational concern. Systemic dehumanization — like the Nuremberg laws — that is what leads to wholesale tragedies.

Do the Israelis perpetrate such systemic dehumanization? Do they do to the Palestinians what the Nazis did to the Jews of Europe? Of course not.

For example, let us compare how each side educates their children about the other. Textbooks in Palestine have improved: They no longer portray Jews as sub-human animals, but it is alarming that they still show maps on which Israel does not exist and advocate violence against Jews, and uphold an understanding of the right-to-return that is no less a fantasy than imagining the U.S. will return Manhattan to the descendants of the natives from whom it was bought. Compare that with the robust debate in Israel about the content of a new civics textbook for Israeli children, which resulted in a book Peter Berkwitz described thusly:

> The book persistently directs students' attention to the ambiguities and strains to which Israel's founding principles give rise. Each chapter

> concludes with exercises that call on students to explore the diversity of perspectives presented, develop arguments, and form their own opinions. The book emphasizes throughout that since its birth Israel has been compelled "to wrestle with its existence as the state of the Jewish people and at the same time a democratic state that is committed to the rights of the national minorities that live in it, in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Independence."

Indeed, one place to look for evidence of systemic dehumanization is in a society's founding or charter documents. The Israeli Declaration of Independence explicitly calls for "full and equal citizenship" for that country's Arab inhabitants. Compare that with the Hamas charter (Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement), which denounces all peace efforts, stating, "There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by Jihad. The initiatives, proposals and international conferences are all a waste of time, an exercise in futility." It cites, approvingly, the classic anti-Semitic forgery *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It warns that the Rotary Club and Lions Club are Zionist agencies. It calls the Camp David Accords "treacherous." The leaders of Hamas have steadfastly and repeatedly refused to acknowledge that Israel has a right to exist. That is to say, they have not moved since 1948, yet Al-Rajani blames only the Israeli occupation for the plight of the Palestinians.

It was stunning — and must have been galling — to the Palestinian political leaders, and to activists like Al-Rajani, that, when President Donald Trump announced he was moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, Egypt and Jordan did not even recall their ambassadors from Washington in protest. That the Arab nations have moved on, that they are more focused on the dangers from Teheran than on the frustrations of the people in Ramallah, this should be an inducement, even a lesson, to the Palestinians to finally, at long last, make peace. Instead, Al-Rajani responds with slander of the grossest sort. That, sadly, is what the future of Palestine seems destined to be: angry, futile, self-defeating. But make no mistake: It is the future they are choosing for themselves.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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