

# The Role of Humiliation in the Palestinian / Israeli Conflict in Gaza

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The Israeli / Palestinian conflict is a long complex unedifying story of lost opportunities, fragile truces, dashed expectations and broken agreements. In this paper I offer a social psychological lens to this conflict that complements the IR perspective, and may help to explain its intractable nature. I focus on humiliation and how it helps to define both the Israeli and Palestinian sense of identity. The emotional impact of the current situation in Gaza is discussed, and how this affects recruitment for resistance organisations. The concept of resentment and humiliation being related to enforced changes of status opens up the possibility for social psychologists to study the potential for conflict by examining status dynamics and hierarchies at a group level of analysis.

Traditionally, the IR study of conflict, with its realist emphasis on power and interests, downplays the role of the psychology of individuals, their emotions and their social relations. As Scheff (2000) remarks, prestige, honour and morale are often discussed but their link to the collective emotions is never analysed. Harkavy (2000) writing in *International Politics* also finds it strange that compensatory revenge for national humiliation is, as he puts it, under-studied. He notes that most of the literature and analysis of humiliation, rage and revenge is at the personal level of analysis, leaving a familiar problem in International Relations – bridging the levels of analysis. I will show at the end of this paper that by analysing humiliation and resentment in terms of changes of social status allows a social psychological analysis to operate at least at the ethnic group level.

Herbert C. Kelman (2008) has played a particularly significant role in identifying the need for a socio-psychological analysis of international relations. Kelman (2008) argues that international conflicts are an inter-social phenomenon are driven by collective needs, including the need for security, identity and self-esteem identified by human needs theorists such as Maslow (1945) and Burton (1990). These needs are often expressed as strong emotions, such as fear, nationalism and pride. Burton (1990) argues that self-esteem is a deep instinctual need that is an integral part of being human, and cannot be compromised or denied without a fierce struggle. I argue that humiliation cuts through self-esteem as it destroys the social hierarchy and demeans and degrades, and this evokes a strong aggressive reaction. If social psychological methods of analysis of this phenomenon can be applied to international conflicts with a significant element of humiliation (especially if the

humiliation is not wholly intentional) then it is possible that this could lead to a better understanding of how to limit or resolve such conflicts.

Social psychology researchers have been working at the edges of this idea, especially with studies of culture, honour and reaction to insult. For example, Mosquera (2000) has studied how honour and individualistic values affect shame, anger and pride by comparing the cultures of Spain and the Netherlands, while Nisbett and Cohen (1996) have examined the effect of culture on aggressive responses by comparing white non-Hispanic male violence in the American South with the North using a number of different methods and indicators. Both of these studies showed that aggression was the preferred means for the preservation of self-respect. This research builds on these ideas about the psychological response to insult as being partly defined by cultural norms regarding violence and the regard of others. While this research is carried out at the individual level of analysis, the findings in relation to cultural attitudes would have some input into the analysis of collective behaviour in the context of war and ethnic violence.

These ideas are brought together in an analysis of the Israeli Palestinian conflict in Gaza. Drawing on theories of Volkan (1988, 1998, 2001) and Mack (1990), I discuss how both societies, having undergone deep trauma and humiliation, remain locked in violent conflict. This paper suggests that the daily humiliations of the people of Gaza helps to build a pool of resentful young men and women, and that this becomes a fertile recruitment ground for resistance organisations, and this recruitment can be described in terms of Moghaddam's staircase metaphor (Moghaddam 2005). Retaliation against aggression results in deeper humiliation and the cycle of violence continues.

I therefore argue in conclusion that bringing the insights of social psychology to an analysis of the micro-level processes of humiliation can help to identify what needs to be addressed in order to resolve such seemingly intractable international conflicts.

## **HUMILIATION AND SELF-RESPECT**

Humiliation has varying connotations with different usage. Within everyday speech it is often used to denote the feeling associated with exposure of inadequacy. However, within a group conflict situation, humiliation takes on a more intense meaning than mere embarrassment. While researching humiliation, I found few researchers had investigated this emotion within the context of specific conflicts, and there are clearly ethical problems with controlled experiments involving humiliation in the lab. Linden (2006), in her introduction, defines humiliation as an enforced lowering of a group by a process of subjugation that damages their dignity. Coleman (2006) presents the same idea. For him humiliation is an emotion triggered by public events which results in a feeling of inferiority through being treated unfairly or inhumanely. Note that this definition involves public events of which all can be aware and does not rely on the intention of the other party. For

example, colonial paternalism may be well-meaning, but be perceived as humiliation. Humiliation denotes the emotion associated with being treated disrespectfully and undeservedly by others. "*How dare they treat me like that*". Humiliation occurs when others treat a group as if they perceive their worth or status to be lower than the group perceives it to be. What the group believes others think about them intensifies the emotion.

There is a subtle but nevertheless important distinction between shame and humiliation, though as Coleman (2006) points out, the two concepts are often conflated within the conflict literature. Shame is the emotion associated with behaving outside acceptable social norms, whereas humiliation is the result of being demeaned because of who you are. Shame is the result of what you *do* whereas humiliation is the result of who you *are*. Shame is generally felt to be deserved whereas humiliation in this context is never deserved.

At a large-group level, humiliation can be the result of ethnic discrimination, ethnic cleansing, or mistreatment by an occupying force. When an individual identifies strongly with an ethnic group that suffers unjustified discrimination, then all negative social experiences tend to be viewed through the filter of that discrimination. In turn this can be used to justify and strengthen the sense of resentment and group identity. "*I didn't get the permit because I'm not one of them*".

## **TRAUMA AND MOURNING**

According to Volkan (2001), some ethnic groups have a major traumatic experience that has become part of their cultural identity. This experience may have been a defeat in battle, or a genocide, or a major loss of prestige or status. The humiliation of this event lives on in the collective memory, and it becomes the job of the next generation to either resolve the loss or reverse the humiliation. No attempt to set the historical record straight will have any effect, as it is not the facts of the event that are relevant, but its mythologized nature as handed down the generations. For example, in *Blood Lines*, Volkan (1998) describes how the Serb obsession with their defeat by the Ottoman Turks at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 became conflated with their war against the Bosnian Muslims. Mladic, Karadzic and Milosevic saw themselves as bearing the responsibility of restoring Serb pride, lost centuries ago.

Mourning has been described as the psychological process through which an individual learns to bear a traumatic loss through repeated and painful remembering (Mitscherlich-Nielsen, 1989, p. 405). There are many ways in which the mourning process can go awry and the final resolution phase remain incomplete. Most common is chronic mourning (Herman, 1997, p. 86), where the acute symptoms of separation anxiety persist interminably. There remains a continual obsession with the loss, life gets stuck in a futile attempt to reunite with it, and all other priorities become insignificant. There is also a sense that the loss is very recent, though it may have occurred years previously. Volkan (1998 p. 41) relates how the Navajo talk of their Long Walk in 1864, when Kit Carson forced

them to walk 300 miles, with 2500 deaths. It is as if it happened yesterday, and “is as real as the morning sunlight”.

Traumatic loss associated with humiliation differs from other types of trauma in that whenever the event is recalled, the humiliation is relived. Coleman, Goldman and Kruger (2006, p. 10) present a list of studies that show that pain and fear can be recalled without being felt anew – there is the memory of the pain and fear, but not more pain and fear itself. However it has been shown that this is not necessarily so with humiliation – the more it is remembered, the more keenly it is felt. Margalit (2002, p. 120) writes, “[W]e can hardly remember insults without reliving them...The wounds of insult and humiliation keep bleeding long after the painful physical injuries have crusted over”.

As humiliation does not dissipate on recall, the repetition compulsion remains strong, and the mourning cannot complete. This compulsion to relive the event to try to gain some mastery over it is described by Mirscherlich-Nielsen (1989, p. 408), and she believes that “the process of mourning frees the individual from a neurotic compulsion to repeat the same thing over and over again”.

Extreme humiliation is in itself a traumatic loss. Humiliation involves the loss of self-esteem, and the resolution of that loss is a type of mourning. Status, self-esteem and regard are all gone, a sense of helplessness, anger and despair haunts the victim. The victim’s world is destroyed, and the sense of self severely damaged. Coming to terms with a new reality is an important part of the mourning process, and this is exceedingly difficult when reserves of strength are badly depleted. Chronic mourning, with its interminable anger and despair, is the most likely result.

Volkan’s description of an ancient trauma being awakened when a sense of identity is under threat has certain parallels with chronic mourning (Volkan, 1998, pp. 155-179), and I maintain that there are substantial similarities between personal mourning and the processes of a group coping with a trauma associated with loss, such as a mass slaughter, forced displacement or a military defeat. The mourning process, in both cases, goes through similar phases and can encounter similar problems, though different aspects can take on a greater priority with group trauma. There is the need for public acknowledgement of the pain and suffering, the obsession with the past that overrides all other priorities, the time collapse giving immediacy to a historical event and thus adding emotional intensity, and the need to somehow make the trauma explicable often by unrealistically assigning blame. The Palestinian emphasis on the “right of return” after 60 years, discussed below, is an example. All these effects are magnified when humiliation plays a part in the trauma, and makes it more likely that chronic mourning results. Humiliation exacerbates trauma, and interferes with the mourning process.

## **REVENGE, RAGE AND SELF-ESTEEM**

Extreme humiliation is often associated with a sense of helplessness in the face of overpowering degrading treatment. This can lead to the emotion of rage, where the violence itself takes greater importance than the target. The explosive nature of a fit of rage, along with the complete disregard for personal safety makes an enraged person fearless and formidable, reassuring them that they are no longer helpless in the hands of their enemies (Horowitz, 2001, p. 41). Rage primarily deals with the overcoming of helplessness, not the righting of wrongs. The target of the violence need not be directly related to the humiliation, as the vengeance aspect is secondary to relieving the build up of frustrations. The re-assertion of self-esteem through taking control of the situation far outweighs any rational considerations of target selection or timing.

The revenge response to humiliation is more considered and calculated. As Nico Frijda (1994) explains, a humiliated people can have a sense of retributive justice which demands a type of "equality of suffering". Only when an oppressor has experienced the same type of hardships do the victims feel that the situation has been resolved, that balance has been restored and justice done. *"Only when you are attacked at random, only when your daily life is wrecked by violence, only then will you realise what you have done to us. Now you know how it feels."* Then humiliation begets humiliation, which not only balances the scales, but also refutes the original humiliation, as the ability to respond displays in itself the overcoming of a demeaning powerlessness.

In practice it can be difficult to disentangle the rage and the revenge elements of violence generated by humiliation, but knowledge of the two forces at work may help to explain why sometimes the justifications and targets of violence may seem bizarre to outside observers.

## **VICTIMHOOD**

Victimhood is the psychological state that comes with being subjected to extreme or persistent low level sense of mortal vulnerability. Montville (1990) claims this depends on at least three factors:

1. Physical or psychological violence must have occurred to the victim or someone close to them
2. The violence is felt to be unjustified by almost any standard. The victim knows that civil and human rights are being violated
3. The assault is part of a continuous threat that generates a fear of annihilation.

The psychology of victimhood has two important outcomes. Firstly, the victims become aware that passivity ensures victimization (Montville, 1990). Unless they respond forcefully, they will continue to be victimized. Secondly, the "egoism of victimization" means that when, as a result of its own traumas, a group can only

tend to its own needs, and they feel little or no sympathy for the hurt they inflict on others. Mack (1990, p. 125).

There is a psychological benefit in a victimised ethnic group keeping its victimhood a priority. Wearing the label of victim provides an assumed entitlement to wreak revenge. Entitlement is the belief that a group can override normal moral concerns and can demand special rights and privileges. This belief of being an exception can be triggered by the extent of suffering endured. "*We may do wrong because we have been wronged*". It is often the case that the urgency and righteousness of one's own claim for retribution completely overrides any recognition of the injury this causes the enemy.

This entitlement reinforces and justifies the retributive justice aspect of revenge, of responding to humiliation by inflicting humiliation in return.

Having outlined the concepts of humiliation, trauma, revenge, rage and victimhood, I now show how they are integral to the conflict in Gaza.

## **JEWISH TRAUMA AND VICTIMHOOD**

An important aspect of humiliation is the feeling of a lack of control, of being helpless and at the mercy of your enemy. The Holocaust genocide was an extreme case of humiliation and helplessness for the Jews of Europe, while the rest of the world looked the other way. The creation of the state of Israel helped the Jews deal with the trauma of the Holocaust. By taking control of their future and building a new country, a safe haven, they had a way of overcoming their sense of helplessness. After the Nazi Holocaust, the threat of extermination for many Jews takes on enormous emotional and psychological significance, and they have the threat of annihilation built into their psyche. (Shalit, 1994). The three major wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973 were fought primarily because neighbouring states refused to recognize their right to exist and threatened to wipe them out, reminding them of the precariousness of their situation. What may appear to some as overblown rhetoric, the threat to "push Israel into the sea" reawakens annihilation anxiety, and brings to the fore the determination not to be passive in the face of the enemy. Many Jewish Israelis recognize that Jews have in the past paid a terrible price for passivity, and an essential part of the Israeli ethos is that "*this time we fight*". The sense of victimhood ensured that passivity was no longer an option. With the safe haven from the expulsions and mob attacks of the past being under threat, the defence of Israel took on an existential urgency.

When Israel was declared a new state in 1948, the Israelis defeated the combined armies of the surrounding Arab states that attempted to destroy the fledgling Israeli nation. For many Jews, this victory defined a new identity, the Jew who isn't going to get pushed around any more, the Jew who does whatever is necessary to defend the safe haven, as there is nowhere else to run to. The annihilation anxiety released a determination and a fervour to repel the attack. The fact that many Palestinians

were expelled from their homes, and villages destroyed was regarded as unfortunate, but larger considerations were at stake. One third of all Jewry was killed in the Nazi death camps, and a strong and secure Israel must exist to ensure that cannot happen again. "Never again" is the political catchphrase that overrides other concerns. Lang (1996) quotes Menachem Begin's justification to the Israeli cabinet on the eve of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982: "The alternative is Treblinka, and we have decided there will be no more Treblinkas". This is the "ego of victimhood" that Mack (1990) refers to, where one's own concerns leave little room for emotional empathy with the suffering of others.

## **PALESTINIAN TRAUMA AND VICTIMHOOD**

The expulsion of 1948, known as *nakba* or catastrophe, was a devastating and traumatic event for the Palestinians. Many fled to Egypt-controlled Gaza, but were not granted Egyptian citizenship. Unlike millions of refugees in the 1940s in the aftermath of World War Two and the Hindu / Moslem conflict in India, the Palestinians have been unable to find a new home. The Arab League passed a decree in 1949 that no Arab state should offer citizenship to a Palestinian or their descendants.<sup>1</sup> While the decree's intention was to avoid dissolution of their identity and protect their right of return, it effectively made Palestinians incapable of settling anywhere. Unlike the Jews, they were unable to make a new home. The "right of return" to Palestine has since become an integral part of the Palestinian identity. The Palestinian historian Abd al-Latif Tibawi, as cited in (Muslih, 1992, p. 73) describes the intensity of the emotion regarding the 'return'.

*"It embraces not only those adults, men and women, and their children who are now homeless, but also children of refugees born in exile. All are being thoroughly and systematically instructed in the mystique of 'the return' in schools and through all the modern media of communications."*

The Palestinians are placed in a situation where it is impossible for them to come to terms with the loss of their homeland. The inability to settle elsewhere and the continued occupation of the camps where they have settled mean that they are continually reminded of their loss.<sup>2</sup> Not only that, but their daily lives revolve around the implications of that loss, and their identity as an ethnic group is defined by it.

Many Palestinians pass on the key of their original home down the generations as a token or symbol of the right of return (Lybarger, 2007, p. 111). Young Gazans feel they belong to villages they have never seen (Lybarger, 2007, p. 188). The loss of homes and homeland has been described by Said Farshain (2006):

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<sup>1</sup> While I have not been able to locate this Arab League proclamation, there are references to it in both the Israeli and Arab press. For example (Ghafour, 2004)

<sup>2</sup> In Gaza about 33% of the 1.3m population still live in camps. (BBC, 2009)

*“People hang on to their homes like snails to their shells. When people have to leave their home, there is a scar at that very place where people and walls met so closely.”*

It is probably better described as a scab rather than a scar – a scab that is continually worried and picked at, and never heals, especially when Israeli bulldozers destroy Palestinian homes in the Occupied Territories.<sup>3</sup>

In this way the losses of the expulsion are continually refreshed in the minds of the Palestinians, and the ability to resolve the mourning of those losses is continually denied.

Volkan (2001) describes the process of chosen trauma, and how the psychological responsibility to reverse the group’s humiliation is passed down the generations. The example of the Palestinians fits well with his theory of generational revenge transmission. Over half the Palestinian population is under the age of fifteen, and will be growing up and developing their sense of self in an atmosphere of unresolved past injustices (Carter, 2006, p. 175)

Edward Said (2000) believes the mutual recognition of suffering of the Holocaust and of the expulsions of 1948 is part of the necessary basis for coexistence of Israelis and Palestinians. The experiences of both are connected, and must be acknowledged as such for there to be any progress. He expresses the frustrations of a society that sees no future for itself, and accepts no responsibility for its own development, stuck in victimhood and mourning for a lost land. Said is describing the symptoms of unresolved mourning, and his plea for the trauma of expulsion to be acknowledged as such recognises the healing processes associated with mourning.

While mutual recognition of each others trauma is a necessary step for resolving this conflict, it is also highly unlikely in this particular conflict. As Kelman (2008) points out, when two parties have existential fears, there are many psychological processes at work which perpetuate distrust of the other. In this case the Holocaust has raised existential fears of annihilation with the Israelis perceiving themselves surrounded by large hostile nations with a terrorist group on their border bent on their destruction. The Palestinians still pine for their homeland within Israeli occupied territory. And added to this toxic mix is the daily humiliation that the Palestinians suffer at the hands of the Israeli security forces and bureaucracy, described below.

## **THE OCCUPATION AND HUMILIATION**

*“Occupation aims, at its core, to deny Palestinians their humanity by denying them the right to determine their existence, to live normal lives in their own homes. Occupation is humiliation. It is despair and desperation.” (Roy, 2007, p. 22).*

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<sup>3</sup> Since 1967, over 18,000 Arab homes have been demolished by the Israelis. (The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, 2008)



The occupation of the territories gained in the 1967 war provided the Palestinians with many reasons for resentment. The Israeli Civil Administration within Gaza presents them with constant day-to-day humiliations. Stern (2003, p. 37) quotes from Israeli reporters Schiff and Ya'ari:

*"Since the occupation began, Palestinians have been at the mercy of the Israeli Civil Administration in every sphere of economic life. Each requirement for a permit, grant or dispensation entailed an exhausting wrestle with a crabbed bureaucracy of mostly indifferent but sometimes hostile clerks and officials – a veritable juggernaut of four hundred Jewish mandarins managing thousands of Arab minions bereft of all authority."*

All travel is severely restricted by checkpoints throughout the West Bank, and entry to and from the Occupied Territories. The simplest of journeys can be delayed by apparently arbitrary searches. Here is an account of a Palestinian travelling to Gaza, quoted by Stern (2003, p. 38):

*"The endless lines of other travellers and children, waiting for the unwelcoming and belligerent faces of their occupiers to place a single stamp in their travel document giving them approval to return to their home; or to arbitrarily interrogate them; imprison them; or deny them entry. The strip searches."*

The checkpoints are one of the most hated practices within the Occupied Territories (Reeves, 2002).

*"Checkpoint stories abound among Palestinians. The Israeli human rights group B'Tselem has documented the cases of 19 Palestinian civilians shot dead without provocation at roadblocks. There have been many cases of Palestinian ambulances being blocked from reaching patients and of pregnant or ill Palestinians being barred from hospitals."*

*"For many Palestinians, the main problem is more mundane. Checkpoints have driven up the price of goods and transport. Journeys of a few miles now take hours, as Palestinians skirt the roadblocks on mud roads. The roadblocks prevent students getting to college and adults getting to work."*

The checkpoints highlight the humiliating aspect of the occupation. They demonstrate that the occupying force has control over the daily lives of the Palestinians. The checkpoint procedure appears arbitrary – the same person is allowed through one day but not another, ID is demanded but not checked against a blacklist, cars are stopped but not searched. But always there is the waiting. Sometimes the humiliation is obvious - young men have to stand for hours with their hands on their heads before being turned back, others are bullied in front of their children (Moore, 2004; Tull, 2001). While the Israelis claim the checkpoints serve to increase security, the anger they generate radicalises the Palestinian

population, and makes checkpoints the target for attacks. This of course makes the soldiers there more nervous and more likely to overreact to anything suspicious, inciting yet more anger.

For many, earning a living is at the mercy of the Israelis. Roy (2007, pp. 251-293) describes in detail the collapse of the Gazan economy. While it is possible for Palestinians to work in Israel and sell their produce there, the frequent and sometimes lengthy closures of the border checkpoints and travel restrictions emphasize the fragility and the one-sidedness of the economic bond. All goods into and out of the Gaza Strip are subject to Israeli checkpoints. Thus the Palestinians feel that they are at the mercy of their oppressors for even food, fuel and other basic necessities. While Israelis are concerned about security issues, the Palestinians feel their livelihoods are being held hostage.

In an environment of repression, occupation and a disintegrating economy, a resistance organisation that can offer an alternative to humiliation and despair will attract recruits. In the following section I will explore some psychological explanations as to how resistance organisations recruit followers.

### **HUMILIATION AND THE RESISTANCE ORGANISATION**

There are many social and psychological forces that operate within a climate of oppression such as that of the Palestinians in the Gaza strip. For those whose sense of self-esteem is primarily based on the ability to protect and support their family, there is a double humiliation. Firstly they are subject to the perceived whims and excesses of their oppressors. Secondly the severe economic disruption means that many cannot earn a living and feed their families, becoming reliant on foreign food aid. As much of this comes from Europe or the UN, there is the extra humiliation of being reliant on the charity of the institutions of the West.

Resistance organisations provide a psychological lifeline, a way to salvage self-respect from a hopeless situation. They offer hope, identity, and a feeling of empowerment to Palestinians along with an ideology that entitles them to act out their frustrations. The first steps in building trust are for the organisation to show that they actually care about the plight of the people. Hamas, the most successful resistance organisation in Gaza, conducts extensive social welfare activities. They provide food, help with housing, and organise sports and social clubs. This helps to spread the Islamic ideals of benevolence and self-sacrifice to areas where the poor are not catered for by the deteriorating and corrupt governing institutions. Using Moghaddam's (2005) staircase metaphor, Hamas has provided means for social improvement on the first floor of the staircase to terrorism. Over half of Hamas's budget goes to social welfare – schools, libraries, mosques, orphanages and clinics (Stern, 2003, p. 49). Having a large welfare program also helps with raising funds, as donors claim they are giving to a charitable cause. In 2006, Hamas won the elections in Gaza, and now run the administration of the territory.

Within Gaza, the authority of Hamas defines the social atmosphere. Stern (2003, p. 47) presents a few reports of what the social situation was like in Gaza during the first Intifada:

*"Palestinians living in Gaza at the time of the first Intifada [1987] talk about the social pressure to participate, even for youth not living in the camps. It was just what everyone did, one young man told me. Interviewees in a study overseen by psychiatrist Jerrold Post also talked about social pressure, and the feeling that they would be ostracised if they didn't participate in the violence. One said a friend recruited him to join Hamas, but that joining was just 'the normal thing to do, as all young people were enlisting. With my Islamic leanings and the social pressure from the Islamic Center, it is only natural that I joined in Hamas activities in the camp'."*

Hamas provides the social atmosphere in which violent resistance is normal and expected, effectively providing options on the second floor of the Moghaddam staircase where concepts of ingroup and outgroup are crystallised. The three arms of Hamas, social welfare, political, and military provide various opportunities for Palestinians to take part in the struggle with varying levels of commitment to resistance, confrontation and violence, and provide many opportunities for Hamas to promote their cause.

The ideology of resistance organisations provides a grand social project infused with noble rhetoric, an irresistible alternative to the despair and depression of helplessness, especially for impressionable teenagers. Adolescents look for ways to validate themselves and crystallize their personality outside the family situation (Volkan, 1988, pp. 36-39). The approval of their peers is crucial during this stage of development, and this is where resistance organisations can play a significant role. These organisations offer a noble alternative to the humiliations and excuses for inaction in the home environment at the time when developing adults are looking for ways to define themselves in the world. This is especially true when there are few other sources of self-esteem or ways to express pride in achievements. As Post, Sprinzak & Denny (2003, p. 184) report, "the profile of a typical Palestinian suicide bomber is age 17-22, uneducated, unemployed, unmarried. Unformed youth"; defined by what they are not, not by what they are. While this analysis holds for the extreme case of suicide bombers, it also resonates with the profile of resistance fighters in general. The resistance group focuses on filling gaps, providing an ideology, a purpose, a livelihood and a cause, which represents the moral engagement of the third floor of the terrorist staircase (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 265). There is a fusing between individual identity and that of the group, especially among the more radical individuals. The individuals appear to have no goals beyond that of the group whose cause they serve (Post, et al., 2003, p. 175). The organization's success is the only route to individual self-esteem. The conflation of individual and group personality and aims is described by Freud (1945) in his analysis of group psychology. Post et al. (2003, p. 176) also explain the psychological advantages of the group: "By belonging to a radical group, otherwise powerless individuals

become powerful". A quote from one of Post's interviewees (Post, et al., 2003, p. 183):

*"An armed action proclaims that I am here, I exist, I am strong, I am in control, I am in the field, I am on the map."*

As Post (1990, p. 38) points out, this has obvious policy implications. If a terrorist's main source of self-esteem arises from being a terrorist, then renouncing violence would be psychologically damaging. In a world of political corruption, unemployment, poverty and despair, the attractions of a well-funded organisation offering a purpose, discipline, benevolence, and a way of resolving problems is immensely attractive. Especially if the group's ideology validates and reinforces the idea that the problem is a "them" that can be overcome. Externalizing the problem makes it possible to defeat, and offers hope.

The resistance organisations use a sense of helpless outrage to justify acts that would seem to counter the well-being of the Palestinians. On the 9<sup>th</sup> April 2008, fighters from Gaza attacked a fuel depot in Israel that was being used to supply the Gaza strip (Witte & Abdulkarim, 2008). USA Today (Pesce, 2008) reports that Abu Ahmed of Islamic Jihad defended the deliberately targeted attack on the fuel depot on which Gazans depend. "This fuel is dipped in humiliation. If their fuel means humiliation for us, we don't want it". Being in the position of having to accept the basic necessities of life from the enemy is a degradation that requires a contemptuous response, hence the attempt at destruction. This plays well to the sense of injured pride of some militant sections of the Palestinian population.

When Hamas fires rockets into Israel, or organises other attacks inside Israel, there is usually a swift retaliation, which Hamas interprets as a new provocation, and more recruits become available, strengthening Hamas's influence. Neither side has learnt that retaliation is always regarded as provocation for another attack by the other side. (MacNair, 2003, p. 8).

This cycle of violence, humiliation and revenge is well described by Mahathir Mohamed (2003), the then prime minister of Malaysia, in his opening address of the 10<sup>th</sup> Islamic summit in 2003. The following is an extract from that speech (complete with its numbered paragraphs):

*"29. Today if they want to raid our country, kill our people, destroy our villages and towns, there is nothing substantial that we can do. . . .*

*30. Our only reaction is to become more and more angry. Angry people cannot think properly. And so we find some of our people reacting irrationally. They launch their own attacks, killing just about anybody including fellow Muslims to vent their anger and frustration. Their Governments can do nothing to stop them. The enemy retaliates and puts more pressure on the Governments. And the Governments have no choice but*

*to give in, to accept the directions of the enemy, literally to give up their independence of action.*

*31. With this their people and the ummah<sup>4</sup> become angrier and turn against their own Governments. Every attempt at a peaceful solution is sabotaged by more indiscriminate attacks calculated to anger the enemy and prevent any peaceful settlement. But the attacks solve nothing. The Muslims simply get more oppressed.*

*32. There is a feeling of hopelessness among the Muslim countries and their people. They feel that they can do nothing right. They believe that things can only get worse. The Muslims will forever be oppressed and dominated. . . . They will forever be poor, backward and weak. . . .*

*33. But is it true that we should do and can do nothing for ourselves? Is it true that 1.3 billion people<sup>5</sup> can exert no power to save themselves from the humiliation and oppression inflicted upon them by a much smaller enemy? Can they only lash back blindly in anger? Is there no other way than to ask our young people to blow themselves up and kill people and invite the massacre of more of our own people?"*

Jessica Stern (2004) also recognises the extent to which humiliation plays a role in resistance organisations.

*"Halfway through my study, I asked a terrorist leader if I was getting it right. I laid out for him what I'd heard again and again, that terrorists were motivated by their perceived humiliation, relative deprivation and fear -- whether personal, cultural or both. I told him how this seemed to me to be what motivated terrorists around the world, including American ones, and that everything else was just sloganeering and marketing.*

*After a silence that stretched almost to the point of discomfort, my interlocutor finally responded. "This is exactly right," he said. "Sometimes the deprivation is imagined, as in America. In Kashmir, it's real. But it doesn't really matter whether it's real or imagined."*

*Holy wars take off when there is a large supply of young men who feel humiliated and deprived; when leaders emerge who know how to capitalize on those feelings; and when a segment of society is willing to fund them. They persist when organizations and individuals profit from them psychologically or financially. But they are dependent first and foremost on a deep pool of humiliation."*

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<sup>4</sup> The community of Muslim believers, transcending race, ethnicity, nationality and class.

<sup>5</sup> There are 1.3 billion Muslims, one fifth of the world's population.

## **A HUMILIATION THEORY OF ETHNIC VIOLENCE**

If humiliation is the emotional response to a demeaning reduction of status, then it may be possible to correlate compensatory revenge with changes in the status hierarchy of different groups within society. Status can be measured by a number of indicators, such as the amount of participation in the political or business elite, which groups run the bureaucracy, who controls the security forces, religious tolerance, language policy, and access to education.

The important difference between this and theories of relative deprivation is that humiliation involves a micro-level effect – a sense of undeserved degradation. A group may have a low status for a considerable period of time, but only when they perceive that to be a degradation will the anger and the need for self-respect lead to violence. The facts of the status difference will not of themselves be enough to provoke a humiliation-based revenge, it's the strength of the associated emotion that is critical. For example, the social situation may remain unchanged, but rising democratic expectations could change a group's perception of their own situation.

If the level of degradation becomes intolerable for the lower status group, then they may seek to reverse the social hierarchy possibly through violence. If the status roles are reversed, through revolution or foreign intervention, then the ruling elite will feel humiliated at its demeaning status change and will likely resort to compensatory revenge. Similarly, the lower status group if elevated to a position of power may well take revenge for years of oppression. The likelihood of violent revenge depends on many factors, such as whether the security force is effective and with which group they feel most aligned.

This theory of status hierarchy presents social psychologists with a personal level tool to examine a group level effect. Similar ideas are explored by Petersen (2002), who applies them to the Baltic states during the chaos of the WWII. However he uses the concept of resentment, which he defines in social justice terms, rather than a forceful emotion associated with the loss of self-respect.

Such analysis may shed some light on the Hutu/Tutsi conflict in Rwanda, Shiite Sunni tensions in the Middle East, sectarian violence in Iraq, the Northern Ireland troubles, and, as discussed in this paper, the ongoing Israeli Palestinian conflict. As this analysis is also suited to examining changes in status hierarchy, it may be instructive to examine cases where foreign intervention or colonial forces have withdrawn, with its quick reshaping of social power and status.

## **CONCLUSION**

The economic, political and social situation in Gaza lends itself easily to many theories of collective violence. By adding an emotional dimension to the conflict we can see how the reactions to trauma on both sides have lead to entrenched positions. The Holocaust trauma gave rise to a preoccupation with security and a

“never again” mentality. The expulsion of the Palestinians, without the ability to settle elsewhere, means that the “return” has become part of Palestinian identity. With the added humiliations and hardships of an occupation and more recently a blockade, young Gazans are looking to resistance organisations to regain their self-respect and find a way out of despair and helplessness.

Humiliation provides an emotional and psychological trigger for aggression, one that can convert a dire social, political or economic situation into a dangerous and violent one. The build-up of resentments from daily humiliations, a sense of abandonment, the breakdown of normal economic life and reliance on aid, the shame of being unable to provide for and protect the family, the trauma of the expulsion, and the accompanying entitlements of victimhood all provide the fertile recruiting ground for resistance organisations. While Hamas provides the organisation and the mechanisms for the violence to be expressed, and for it to continue, it relies on a supply of resentful and humiliated young men and women for its front line.

As humiliation involves an emotional reaction to a change of social status, it becomes possible for social psychologists to address the link between micro-level emotions and political collective conflict. Thus a study of the social status hierarchy could inform an understanding of how perceptions of social conditions trigger conflict.

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