

Shades of gray and the wonders of belief

A martyr is someone who sacrifices himself for that in which he believes. It makes little or no difference, whether his belief is a means to delude himself or simply adherence to a popular religious faith. In both cases, it is the uncompromising strength of his character that leads him or her to self-destruction.

Recently Milad Mohammed Hemeida, a young Egyptian of humble origin and means, became a martyr when he forced his way across the Egyptian border into Israeli-occupied Palestine. His assassin was of course an Israeli border guard, who felt threatened by the possibility of a suicide bomber walking into his midst and ignoring his commands. Milad Mohammed Hemeida was not carrying a bomb and had utilized the threat of self-detonation as a means to force his way across the border. Perhaps he was so naïve as to believe that the Israelis would not shoot; more likely, however, he was fully aware of what awaited him. Had I been the Israeli soldier who shot him, I would have felt little or no remorse. Notwithstanding, Milad Mohammed Hemeida has been declared a martyr by much of the Arab and non-Arabic Islamic world, and rightfully so.

What must make Islamic martyrdom so distasteful to the West is the violent aggression towards unarmed 'innocent' others that accompanies it. Surely it cannot be the act of suicide itself, because much of the Catholic Church glorifies those who willingly sacrifice themselves in the name of their belief. Nevertheless, since September 11, 2001 I have read on several occasions in the international press, as prominent world leaders have criticized Arab suicide-bombers as social losers and cowards, whose only path to fame is blowing themselves and others up.

Recently Robert Steinhaueser walked into his former school in Erfurt, Germany, and killed several students and 14 adults including many teachers and a very popular vice-principal. He then turned on himself. What this unfortunate deed shares with Palestinian and Al Qaeda suicide-bombers is the intentional act of killing and maiming "innocent" others. To the extent that those killed by Robert Steinhaueser were "innocent" with regard to their own tragic ends we will probably never know. Nevertheless, few acts of revenge are committed against the totally innocent.

Just as suicide is often sanctioned by the Christian church, so too are acts of revenge sanctioned by many governments: the death penalty is a case in point, as many people raise their voices in approval when a known criminal is hung from gallows or electrified in a chair for proven criminal acts. In this regard there will be few people very sympathetic with Robert Steinhaueser's tragic end. For his vengeful acts were likely approved by

few, if any, other than himself -- much less the German state that reserves the right of force on behalf of its own citizens.

But what about the Palestinian suicide-bombers, the one's who are not pretending? Their supporters easily span two continents and their number probably amounts to many hundreds of millions. Moreover, many an Arabic government has justified at least in part the continuation of the bombings.

Are the Robert Steinhaesers of our world comparable with Palestinian suicide-bombers? Probably not. Are they comparable with Osama bin Laden? More justifiably so, but even here the line is difficult to draw. Just how innocent were those killed in the Twin Towers and Pentagon attacks anyway? We all live in this world together and are thus, each in his own way, responsible for what happens to those around us. This is especially true for private citizens of democratic countries, who have the power to choose their leaders and seek their expulsion -- leaders with broad world reach.

It is understandable that the United States is fighting a war against Osama bin Laden and his terrorist network, just as it is understandable that Milad Mohammed Hemeida's assassin was an Israeli border guard. Notwithstanding, what is the moral and ethical justification for condemning Palestinian suicide bombers, while Israeli troops overrun Palestinian towns, villages, and refugee camps in the name of their own security? It is one thing to target one's own assassins, it is quite another to wreak general havoc on one's neighbors.... In Palestine there are no children flying kites; no one is shaving his beard with a sigh of liberation; there is no music blaring from radio stations that heretofore were banned from playing music. In fact, the situation is quite the opposite. The Palestinian people are compelled to remain indoors by externally imposed curfews, the houses of entire Palestinian families are being crushed by Israeli bulldozers, and thousands of young men have been rounded up and made subject to acrimonious interrogation.

Others have pointed out many times that they are in the midst of war. Can one compare the killing of oneself along with unarmed "innocent" others of a vastly superior enemy, with the massacres of innocent victims by superiors forces such as occurred when napalm was dropped on vast stretches of peasant forest land in Vietnam by US military commanders?

The world is both crazy and gray, not good and evil, or black and white, as President Bush and his fellow administrators would have us believe. If a peaceful settlement is ever to be reached in the Middle East, then both President Bush and Ariel Sharon, as well as their associates and followers, must pay closer attention to their countries' own words and deeds before they condemn the Palestinian people's only means of self-defense.

Neither Yasir Arafat, nor any other Palestinian leader can dictate an end to suicide bombings. So long as the majority of Palestinians perceive these acts as heroic events and the only means of self-defense, no internal or external security force will be able to bring about a lasting peace. It was not the Palestinians who drove Israelis out of their homes in the aftermath of World War II, while the free world stood by and watched. It was not the Palestinians, who for half a century have continued to encroach

on land set aside for Palestinians. No, it has been quite the opposite. Peace can never be achieved until the Palestinian people and their friends can finally believe that Israel's neighbors are free of Israeli dictates and incursions, and Israel has returned the land it has stolen.

Recently Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia presented President Bush of the United States with an eight-point plan on behalf of his own government and the governments of other Arab countries. This is an ideal moment to find sustained agreement.

It is the Palestinian people who must believe that their right to self-determination has been inexorably guaranteed. For without this generally held belief those who seek revenge will always find a sympathetic ear and thus a means of support to commit their both heinous and heroic acts. Empty words and promises coming from the leaders of either side will convince no one, least of all the Hamas and Hezbollah. Strong, forceful visible acts must occur, and they must occur quickly before the world falls once again into slumber, and the petty, self-righteous bitterness of right-wing Israeli leaders becomes an institutional feature of the Israeli general public. Israel has a friend in the United States. Who is powerful enough to protect the Palestinians?

R.A. Stegemann
April 28, 2002
(1199 words)