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# The Pro-Palestinian Left's Hamas Blindspot

Peter Beinart

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Earlier this week, news that Hamas had barred women from participating in a marathon in the Gaza Strip scrolled across my twitter feed. Instantly, I knew two things. First, that “Pro-Israel” hawks would lambast the Islamist group without ever considering the way in which Israel and America’s policy of isolating Gaza makes it easier for Hamas to practice the very misogyny the hawks rightly condemn. Second, that the anti-Zionist left would say nothing at all.

Explaining the hawks’ reaction is easier. It’s an article of faith on the American and Israeli right that once Israel dismantled its settlements in Gaza, it discharged all responsibility for the place. Rarely do hawks acknowledge the way Israel’s restrictions on the movement of people and goods in and out of Gaza have destroyed the Strip’s independent business class, limited access to Western education and helped Hamas consolidate control. In the words of Sir Tom Phillips, Britain’s former ambassador to Israel, the partial blockade has helped make Gaza a place where “young boys on the streets [have] no role models apart from the Hamas guy in the black shiny uniform on the street corner.”

The far left doesn’t have that problem. Anti-Zionists rarely discuss Gaza without foregrounding Israel’s partial blockade or what they often call “the siege.” But in so doing, they give Hamas an almost total pass. On March 6, the anti-Zionist website Mondoweiss linked, without comment, to an article about the marathon as the 33rd story in its daily rundown of Israel-Palestine news. When I searched for “marathon” at Ali Abunimah’s site, Electronic Intifada, I was directed to a March 2012 story entitled “Athlete abused by Israeli soldier for carrying Palestine flag in Jerusalem marathon,” and an April 2012 story entitled “Egypt Football Association to boycott Adidas due to company’s sponsorship of Jerusalem marathon.” But I found nothing about the marathon in Gaza.

Every blog misses things. But spend enough time reading the anti-Zionist left and you notice a pattern. Type “ Hamas ” into Electronic Intifada’s search engine and not a single one of the first twenty headlines suggests harsh criticism of the Islamist group. Type in “ Abbas ,” by contrast, and you’re met with headlines like “ Palestinian protesters harassed, beaten by Abbas supporters in Jerusalem ” and “ Mahmoud Abbas’ war against the Palestinian people .” At Mondoweiss, there’s less animosity toward Abbas and it’s a little easier to find criticism of Hamas. (In September 2010, for instance, Mondoweiss published an article entitled, “ Hamas attack was wrong .”) Still, Mondoweiss devotes far more attention to Israel and America’s policies toward Hamas than to Hamas’ policies toward the people of Gaza. And it devotes far more attention to the way American and Israeli hawks exaggerate Hamas’ misdeeds than to those misdeeds themselves.

The Gaza marathon ban is not an isolated event. It’s one more example of Hamas’ frighteningly misogynistic policies. The group has banned women from riding on the back of motorcycles and smoking hookah pipes. It tried to make all women lawyers in Gaza courts wear headscarves. It has promoted policies requiring female students at Gazan universities to wear socially conservative “ Islamic dress .” It has tried to ban books deemed “ salacious ” and cracked down on film that doesn’t meet its reactionary norms. Hamas has prevented students who received scholarships to study in the United States from traveling there for what the group calls “ social and cultural reasons ,” in other words to protect them from Western influence. Male hairdressers in Gaza are no longer allowed to cut women’s hair. Hamas has shut down mixed gender water parks. It has cracked down brutally on peaceful protest, especially when the protesters are women, and arrested numerous journalists. You can learn about this from human rights groups, from the international press, from the Israeli press, and from the Palestinian news service, Maan, which has had its own run-ins with Hamas. But you’re unlikely to learn about it from Mondoweiss or Electronic Intifada.

This tolerance for certain brands of thuggery is an old story on the left. At its core is the belief that anyone who battles “ imperialism ” can’t be that bad. Fatah, which controls the West Bank, and Hamas, which controls Gaza, are both repressive. So why does Electronic Intifada direct so much more bile toward the former than the latter? Because Hamas is unequivocally hostile to Israel, the “ imperialist ” power, while Abbas and Israel are—from Electronic Intifada’s perspective—in cahoots. The yardstick, in other words, is not how a Palestinian group treats its own people but how it treats Israel. If it exhibits sufficient hatred of the Jewish state, Electronic Intifada overlooks its flaws. But if a Palestinian leader cooperates with Israel, Electronic Intifada amplifies his misdeeds because it sees the ultimate author of those misdeeds as Israel itself, the one and only true enemy of Palestinian human rights between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

We’ve seen this before. In the 1930s, many in the old left excused Joseph Stalin because he opposed capitalism. In the 1960s, many in the New Left excused Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh because they battled American hegemony. Since the Cold War, some in the anti-globalization movement have excused Hugo Chavez for the same reason. In each case, the character of the people fighting Western imperialism didn’t really matter; what mattered was that they were waging the fight. Similarly, many on the global left overlook the misdeeds of Hamas, which is, after all, Palestine’s version of the religious right, not because it has the correct values but because it has the correct enemies.

Morally, the problem is that even when political movements are battling far stronger enemies, they can still abuse the people under their control and poison the societies they purport to

liberate. Hamas may not govern a sovereign state, as some American and Israeli hawks claim. But it still decides whether to torture prisoners, execute “collaborators” and allow women the basic freedoms every Mondoweiss contributor would demand in the United States. Moreover, the decisions Hamas makes now will shape how it behaves when Palestinians more fully govern themselves, as they one day surely will. To imagine, as leftists often have, that you can ignore the moral character of a national liberation movement until it achieves liberation is naïve. By then it will be too late.

Palestinians and their supporters, I suspect, don’t want to publicly air dirty linen that they fear will be exploited by people fundamentally hostile to them. (Where have I heard that before?) But the people who want Palestinians to remain stateless will broadcast Hamas’ misdeeds anyway. Less important than what the pro-Palestinian left says to the Zionist right is what it says to itself about the true nature of its struggle. Is the goal merely an end to Israeli control over Palestinian lives or is it individual liberty and accountable government. If it’s the latter, websites like Electronic Intifada and Mondoweiss must start acknowledging that Israel is not the only abuser of Palestinian human rights. Human rights can be menaced by every national and ideological camp, and thus must be defended against every national and ideological camp. Hamas’ banning of women from the Gaza marathon would have been a good time to start.

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