

Who is the Culprit? Terrorism and its Roots: Victims (Israelis) and Victims (Palestinians) in Light of Jacques Derrida's Philosophical Deconstruction and Edward Said's Literary Criticism

Husain Kassim, Associate Professor and Director of Middle Eastern Studies Program, University of Central Florida

Abstract

Terrorism, however it is defined, has come to be associated with the Middle East and Muslim world without taking into consideration a wider and broader perspective of its origins in the context of Western hegemony of the past, present and future. The entire blame is thrown upon the Middle East and Muslim world rather than looking deeper into the past of the Western history of victimizing people. The case in point is the people of Israel and Palestine. Looking at the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and its history, it becomes clear that the cause of terrorism has very little to do with the violent nature of Middle Eastern countries, including Israel and its religious fundamentalism. This fact is not taken into account even by Jacques Derrida's and Edward Said. This article revisits Jacques Derrida's and Edward Said's discourse on the subject and examines their suggested solution for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Its sole purpose is to find out what is missing in their approaches that makes their solution inadequate. This article is, in its scope, limited as it does not attempt to provide any solution to the conflict.

Who is the Culprit? Terrorism and its Roots

There are several investigations on different aspects of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, especially dealing with the strategies for preventing terrorist activities, balancing of power between Israelis and Palestinians by super powers and maintaining order in the region, ideology and psychology of terrorists. There are, however, very few investigations that focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has come to be considered the 'bed' of terrorism and needs to be prevented from spreading throughout the region, without consideration of the primary cause of the conflict. When one reads literature or articles in journals and newspapers on the subject of terrorism and its impact on the Middle East and global politics, then it creates more terror in the reader than the terror which in fact exists. But this cannot be said of Derrida and Said. "If Said was the last Jewish intellectual, Derrida was the last after the last,"¹¹ both are serious thinkers, who offer their views concerning the conflict and suggestions toward a solution from their own perspective and point of view, though they end up offering the solution of co-existence of Israelis and Palestinians in the state of Israel, but on different grounds: Derrida's deconstruction is an expression of Jewish sensibility and his solution is grounded in the Jewish concept of 'hospitality', whereas Said's approach is based on the secular concept of the state of Israel, where all citizens, both Israelis and Palestinians, are considered citizens of the state

¹¹ Martin Macquillan, *Deconstruction After 9/11* (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2009), p. 209. Macquillan is referring to Said's response in an interview with Ari Shavit for *Ha'dretz Magazine* in 2000.

having equal rights in every aspect. On the surface their suggestions sound good, but they are impossible to be actualized considering the fact that the two communities, Israelis and Palestinians, have different ideological orientations, goals and aspirations that makes it difficult to determine whether suggested solutions are agreeable for Israelis as well as Palestinians.

Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to examine these two different and diametrically opposing approaches as they reveal interesting aspects of the discourse. They also show that something of vital importance is missing which is the real cause of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

The question is to determine the cause before one can deliberate over the present situation. Why did it occur, who caused it and what were their interests for which the 'mythical' state of Israel was 'invented' and successfully created? Why does conflict between Israelis and Palestinians continue to persist with no resolution at the present time or the near or distant future?

In order to do full justice in examining their positions, it should be made clear before proceeding any further that Derrida's analysis is from the point of view of philosophical deconstruction which results in the rejection of the Kantian notion of the cosmopolitan state which is secular, although 'Jewishness' or of 'Jew' per se are undoubtedly, but not essentially linked to Israel or Zionism.² Said's analysis of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict is from the point of view of literary criticism which is based on the Kantian notion of the cosmopolitan idea of a secular state and in a similar manner, his approach is not simply linked to his being a Palestinian and Middle Eastern.

First to begin with Derrida, he declares in no uncertain terms:

“I wish to state now my solidarity with those, in the land [of Israel] who advocate an end to violence, condemn the crimes of terrorism and of military and police repression, and advocate the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied territories as well as recognition of the Palestinians' right to choose their own representatives to negotiations now more indispensable than ever.”³

Derrida does not clarify how this is going to be accomplished especially in light of the recent developments in the Zionist movement after the establishment of the State of Israel. Derrida simply develops his position from Hermann Cohen and Emmanuel Levinas.

Cohen was a neo-Kantian or as Derrida says 'a Jewish Kant', who wrote an article entitled "Kant, the Jew, the German". This article was written during the times of the Second World War in order to gain the support of American Jews so that the United States of America would not

² Martin Macquillan, *Deconstruction after 9/11* (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2009), p. 159.

³ Jacques Derrida, "Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German" in *Acts of Religion*, edited and with an Introduction by Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 138.

enter into war against Germany by identifying ‘Deutschtum’ (Germanity) with ‘Judentum’ (Jewishness).⁴ They both share the same traditions stemming from Greek philosophical thought, culture and moral values. Cohen invokes the great neo-Platonic figure, Philo Judaeus. His neo-Platonic Logos puts the seal on Judeo-Hellenic thought without which the institution of Christianity would have been impossible to conceive. Within the elements of Logos and of Christianity, Greek becomes the fundamental source of Germanity. Cohen boldly asserts “the Germans are Jews.”⁵ One wonders if Germans would agree with this statement even today. Derrida’s commentary on Cohen’s statement runs without any comment on this point. According to Cohen, the Christian Logos serves as a mediator between Judaism and Christianity. Germans and Jews can identify with each other for their Seele (psyche). Thus “(t)he homeland” of Jews ... is not Israel but Germany.”⁶ Of course, Cohen was addressing this issue of a homeland for the Jews during the Second World War. Derrida seems to think that Cohen was perfectly justified in holding this view. It seems that Derrida, being himself a French national, implicitly thinks it to be perfectly valid and historically justified.

But in his later work *Adieu*, a commentary on Immanuel Levinas’ concept of ‘hospitality’ which is grounded in the Jewish religious tradition, he relates this concept to his vision of the State of Israel as a homeland of the Jews and its future. Levinas calls it ‘beyond the state’ or more specifically ‘going beyond the political state’. Derrida accepts this idea whole heartedly and takes a strong stand in favor of it. Derrida notes that this concept of hospitality opens up by an act of force for a declaration of peace itself.⁷ This idea is non-political as opposed to “the Western hegemonic concept of state and exceeds it.” Derrida interprets this as “it interrupts itself” or ‘deconstructs itself’⁸ and interiorizes the ethical dimension which the concepts of hospitality demands. By interiorizing the ethical in the political, it transcends the pure political and Western modern hegemonic concept of state. Thus peace is a concept that goes beyond simply and purely political as a secular institution, its strategies and rhetoric by which it tries to deal with the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. This purely political notion has ended up in nothing but terrorist activities by both parties causing suffering for each other. In order to create the concrete conditions for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, Derrida goes to the heart of Levinas’ concept of hospitality and declares that peace is neither simply political, nor purely apolitical.⁹ It belongs to an entirely different domain where reaffirmation of ethics, the subjectivity of the hostage, projects the passage toward the political creating the concrete conditions for peace. For this Israel has to create the prophetic and Messianic ethical and moral code as well as its idea of peace. “This idea of peace contrary to hostility or war means

⁴ Ibid., p. 146.

⁵ Ibid., p. 148.

⁶ Ibid., p. 169.

⁷ Martin Macquillan, *Deconstruction after 9/11* (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2009), p. 161.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), p. 80

⁹ Ibid., p. 82.

hospitality.”¹⁰ According to Derrida who follows Levinas, so to say literally, this idea of peace opens up the door for welcoming and accepting a stranger or ‘other’ as a guest, meaning Palestinians by Israelis as equal. This allows the Jewish state of Israel to extend the hospitality to Palestinians by giving them equal rights as the citizens of Israel in politics, economics and all other walks of life. For Derrida, all rhetoric in the ‘peace process’ between Israelis and Palestinians, and the strategies such as two separate states of Israel and Palestinians, is doomed to failure. This is also the view of Said’s discourse on the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, but on an entirely different ground as we shall see in the following paragraphs.

Said also maintains as did Derrida that the solution to the conflict is the coexistence of the Israelis and Palestinians in the state of Israel. Said declares:

“My assumption throughout is that as a Palestinian I believe that neither the Arabs nor the Israelis have a real military option, and that only hope for the future is a decent and fair coexistence between two peoples based on equality and self-determination.”¹¹

As already mentioned in this context, Derrida’s method of philosophical deconstruction consisted in reading, analyzing and deconstructing the texts, particularly, of Cohen and Levinas, whereas Said’s concern is to deconstruct it by the method of literary criticism on the basis of the Kantian notion of state on the institutional level. According to Said, Derrida’s method of philosophical deconstruction needs some greater degree of specification he has given to it¹² in the hyperbolic terms. It should become more worldly and political rather than apolitical which should be reflected realistically in the radicalization of deconstruction as an institutional grouping. For Said, deconstruction should be primarily a post-colonial strategy with liberation from an unjust colonization as its aim, which is wanting in Derrida’s method of philosophical deconstruction. It is in this sense that Said’s method of literary criticism is more pragmatic as well as realistic for he takes into account the relationship between the Israelis and Palestinians as a result of the developments of the Zionist ideology after the establishment of the state of Israel, which Derrida’s approach does not address at all. This makes Derrida’s approach purely theoretical and hyperbolic. Said maintains, for right or wrong, that all the Jewish intellectuals such as Cohen never spoke of Israel to be a Jewish homeland for all Jews anywhere before the establishment of the state of Israel. With Levinas and Derrida it becomes the homeland of Jews though both of them do not base it on the ideology of Zionism. But in recent years Israel has developed Zionism into political Zionism, contrary to what it was supposed to be. This “political Zionism repeats the mistakes of the very thing it seeks to oppose i.e. European anti-Semitism.”¹³ Said, witnessing the situation with his own eyes and being himself a displaced Palestinian,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

¹¹ Edward Said, *The End of Peace Process* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000), p. xii.

¹² Martin Macquillan, *Deconstruction after 9/11* (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2009), p. 153.

¹³ Martin Macquillan, *Deconstruction after 9/11* (New York and London: Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2009), p. 158.

strongly feels the oppression and suffering of his own people in this present situation, as Levinas and Derrida felt what had happened to the Jews in the past during the Nazi era, and finds no other possibility except the co-existence of the Israelis and Palestinians in the land of Israel rather than two separate states, namely, the state of Israel and the state of Palestine. The ‘two states’ strategy has been, in spite of many attempts and treaties, not actualized. Both Derrida and Said support co-existence of the Israelis and Palestinians, but on different grounds. According to Said, Derrida’s proposal is too meta-theological which ignores the realities of political Zionism which has created the discourse of ‘peace’, but without participation of the Palestinians. One state solution for the co-existence of Israelis and Palestinians calls for a radical and complete ‘deconstructed Zionism’, a deconstructed Palestinian self-determination as that of Israelis. Derrida’s concept of hospitality as an opening up for political solution does not create a sufficient condition for the Palestinians to be considered equal citizens with the Israelis and having equal rights for political and economic participation in the state of Israel. This concept of hospitality makes the Palestinians feel that they are marginal citizens and the state of Israel grants rights out of kindness as if the Palestinians were of a different place and not the original citizens of the territory: The victims (Jews) of the Western anti-Semitism who were once granted the right to citizenship and were given the state of Israel, now granting rights to their own victims (Palestinians). This is really not hospitality and makes the Palestinians virtually inferior. This is similar to what Derrida himself has said concerning the concept of tolerance which “is “always on the side of the ‘reason of the strongest’ where ‘might is right’; it is a supplementary mark of sovereignty, ‘the good face of sovereignty’”¹⁴ – a manifestation of the Western hegemony. The state of Israel has simply no right to offer hospitality in this case. The true gesture of hospitality is ‘giving someone in need of something that does not belong to him’. – Levinas would also agree with this statement, but Derrida is neglectful of it.

Thus Said’s final position is a bi-national state of Israel based on full secular democracy for all citizens, the Israelis as well Palestinians, which articulates an idiom of sovereignty that should aim for resulting in a discourse and not a division and continued injustice inflicted upon its citizens.

From Derrida’s and Said’s discourse regarding the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and their effort to deal with the seriousness of the present situation, it becomes clear that both of them have not raised the question of what was the real cause and who was the real culprit causing it before delving upon the solution. Since Derrida’s approach is within the framework of the Judaic worldview as a Jewish state of Israel, it is questionable that it would be appropriate for the Palestinians and their mode of life as citizens of the state of Israel. Said’s approach is secular and considers that Derrida’s philosophical deconstruction does not go far enough and should aim for liberation from an unjust colonization as a post-colonial strategy. But seen from the wider perspective, the British and Western powers in the past were responsible for causing the conflict

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, “A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* by Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 127.

between the Israelis and Palestinians. Later the responsibilities are thrown on the shoulders of the Israelis and Palestinians and they, in turn, blame each other for creating further disintegration and disunity among themselves. For that matter, though Palestinians are perceived to be victims of victims, Israelis themselves are dependent for their continued existence on the Western powers and especially the United States of America as their ally. In that sense, they are still the victims of past hegemony.

Israel was founded on the belief that its future was non-European which caused the Holocaust in the present age and a long history of discrimination and prejudices against the Jews culminating into anti-Semitism in terms of race, religion and ethnicity. It was the direct consequence and by-product of the Enlightenment ideology, which though it benefited Europeans to a great deal, simultaneously created Western hegemony all over the world. The present crisis in the Middle East and particularly the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, which British and Western powers left behind, is a sad story. This aspect concerning the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is neglected in Derrida's as well as Said's discourse. They focus on the issue from a narrower perspective and in a limited context which in itself is the product of a much wider and broader context of the Western Enlightenment ideology. This is reflected in the relationship between the Israelis and Palestinians. It is simply not a matter of dealing with the situation which took place very recently and suddenly that the victims (Jews) of European anti-Semitism are now subjecting Palestinians to become their own victims. In this case both are victims of a culprit – the West. The West still bears responsibility¹⁵ as the inheritor of the Enlightenment ideology of hegemony. This is an uninterrupted historical consequence of the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. These are the chain reactions in response to and in consequence of the Western hegemony, but its responsibility is delegated to the victims (Jews) and the victims of victims (Palestinians), leaving the culprit, the West, unaccountable.

Given the situation as is, it is difficult to determine whether Derrida's and Said's proposal for the co-existence of Israelis and Palestinians is truly feasible. It is highly problematic that the Israelis themselves would agree with Derrida's idea and also if all the Palestinians would accept Said's solution of co-existence of Israelis and Palestinians, especially when one considers the various political and religious factions such as Israelis Haredim and Palestinian Hamas.

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¹⁵ Martin Macquillan, *Deconstruction after 9/11* (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2009), p. 165.

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