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Restraints on Restraint: Attributions and Israeli Violence

Editor

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Title: Restraints on Restraint: Attributions and Israeli Violence

Author: Editor

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Abstract. This article describes aspects of social cognition that may be implicated in conclusions about the degree of restraint attributed to acts of violence perpetrated by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) towards some individuals claiming the identity of Palestinians who live in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel itself.

The ongoing violence between and among individuals claiming the identity of Palestinians and Israeli-Palestinians, others claiming the identity of Israelis, and their various supporters and adversaries continues. One salient contention has been that non-Palestinian Israelis and their supporters have not used restraint in their violent behavior against the others. This contention--most often made by Palestinians, Israeli-Palestinians, and their supporters--has led to significant international opprobrium against Israel by many countries and by multilateral government and non-government organizations.

Have the Israelis shown ample restraint? Such a question implies that there is one right answer and even that this answer has an ontological grounding. However, most social cognition approaches to elucidating attributions of restraint in violent behavior or even other kinds of behavior suggest that there are many answers with no necessary ontological grounding.

Attributions of restraint by an observer of another's violent behavior can depend on combinations of the observer's belief concerning the intention of the individual being observed, the act itself, the consequences of the act, and the environment in which the act occurs. This environment embraces situational variables, ecological ones, and aspects of the historical moment. In the ongoing violence attributed to Israelis, the consequences of this violence have been most often emphasized. Emphasis on these consequences has successfully reinforced the social cognition that the Israelis have indeed shown little restraint.

It is this analysis that makes understandable a paragraph written by New York Times correspondent Deborah Sontag. She writes: "To Palestinians, the Israeli perception of restraint...sounds ludicrous and offensive. Palestinian officials point out their death toll and the relative balance of fatalities--more than 125 people have been killed, almost all of them Palestinian. 'What kind of restraint is this?' asked Saeb Erekat, a senior Palestinian official."

As with most public affairs, propaganda, and active measures efforts of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), the emphasis on consequences makes psychological sense. Moreover, the consequences proximally effected by the Israelis are being distally controlled and elicited by the PLO, PNA, and their supporters--as if the last three entities engage in behavior as discriminative stimuli eliciting IDF behavior. To turn the situation around to their own advantage, representatives of the Israeli government and the IDF would have to not violently respond to the violence of the PLO, PNA, and their supporters. Alternatively, they could focus on aspects of the environment and their own intentions that could reinforce attributions of restraint. They could even transcend the low intensity conflict and parsing of restraint attributions by employing high- intensity

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military might and secure its political boundaries. In fact, this last suggestion seems to be well-supported by a world history that suggests peace becomes a reality only after a definitive war.

The odds are, however, that the Israelis will not engage in high intensity conflict. As long as they don't, they'll be fighting according to Palestinian rules, on Palestinian turf, and furthering Palestinian political goals. In this context, the sheer brilliance of PLO political strategy and tactics since the mid-1960s will lose none of its luster. (See Duncan, B.L. (1976). Differential social perception and attribution of intergroup violence: Testing the lower limits of stereotyping of Blacks. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34, 590-598; Holtzworth-Munroe, A. (1988). Causal attributions in marital violence: Theoretical and methodological Issues. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 8, 331-344; Hunter, J. A., Stringer, M., & Watson, R. P. (1991). Intergroup violence and intergroup attributions. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 30, 261-266; Sontag, D. (October 25, 2000). Gun lessons are suddenly all the rage in Israel. *The New York Times*, p. A4; Summers, G., & Feldman, N. S. (1984). Blaming the victim versus blaming the perpetrator: An attributional analysis of spouse abuse. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 2, 339-347.) (Keywords: Israel, Palestinian Liberation Organization, Palestinian National Authority, Restraint.)