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Psychological Profiles and the Intifada: Commentary on Sarhan and Al Khatib

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Abstract. This article critiques a psychological profile that was developed to help explain the ongoing Palestinian Intifada and that was written by two physicians working at a Jordanian psychiatric hospital.

The August 15, 2001 Issue of The Jordan Times, an English language newspaper that is available online at http://www.jordantimes.com, contained an article entitled "A Psychological Profile of the Intifada." The article was attributed to Walid Sarhan and Jamal Al Khatib, two "doctors" at the Al Rashid Psychiatric Hospital in Amman, Jordan. The article may be read as contributing to professional discourse in the social sciences and humanities on how the choice of language in psychological profiling and psychological and historical interpretation necessarily conflates an objective truth, a preferred narrative, and political consequence.

More specifically, many behavioral and social science professionals primarily focus on notions of disparity between profiling and interpretation on the one hand and a Truth independent of human sensation and perception on the other. Fewer of these professionals primarily focus on narrative qualities of profiling and interpretation bearing on teleology, pragmatics, resonance, and persuasiveness. Still fewer professionals primarily focus on the political consequences--for the author, reader, and those that interact with them--of profiling and interpretation. It is to the latter that we will turn.

Sarhan and Al Khatib refer to the object of their analysis as the "Second Palestinian Intifada." Using "Second" suggests two discrete political uprisings of a particular type and level of participation, even if the same type and participation level may have occurred at other times or on an ongoing basis. Its use also reinforces a linkage between two events regardless of the ontological validity of that linkage. Using "Palestinian" reinforces the notion that only certain people who live, have lived, or wish to live in some territory called Palestine--people who must be identified only through certain political organs such as the Palestinian National Authority and its allies--can be considered worthy of the descriptor. Other individuals and groups are left out in the cold regardless of familial experience, individual motivation, and the like. And using capitalization for the object of analysis affords that object an import that may exemplify aggrandizement depending on supporting data.

Sarhan and Al Khatib's choice of a construct involving many people, the "Intifada," as opposed to one involving an individual reinforces the ontological validity of the construct. The choice also reinforces the perception of a group of people of common or similar purpose, intention, and motive. (So, too, the frequent use of "Palestinian" and "Israeli" as if all falling under one of the two terms are all alike.) Further, the choice reinforces the putative reliability and validity in profiling and interpreting concatenations of people--a perspective that goes back to the beginnings of scientific psychology with Wundt's Volkerpsychologie and Le Bon's Collective Ideas and Collective Logic but that arguably has not progressed in resolving its problematic and self-contradictory aspects.

Sarhan and Al Khatib ironically jettison a seeing is believing criterion of reality for the mass media through an emphasis on satellite coverage and instantaneous broadcasting as a salient characteristic of

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the "Second Palestinian Intifada." Although one might believe that seeing is believing because photographs and videotape cannot lie, the choice of what is transmitted versus what is not is based on (1) business decisions on what will sell; (2) business, political, and military threats on what will be allowed to be recorded and to sell; and (3) beliefs about what could be accurate and about the import of what is accurate belie the initial premise. Moreover, political ideology can significantly affect conscious and unconscious, sensory and perceptual reactions to photographic and video data including lay and professional profiling and interpretive processes.

Sarhan and Al Khatib also emphasize the psychology of perpetrators and targets of Intifada as a program of psychological warfare with the Israeli "facing an enemy who doesn't care about death," with "Young [anti-Israeli] men?.on the waiting list to carry out such [suicidal] operations," and with "Israelis?.seeing every Palestinian as a potential bomb." If politics can be denoted as a phenomenologically based activity of obtaining finite resources in a world of infinite needs, one might view death defyers and death seekers as ineluctably politically successful even as they ultimately transcend political concerns. Repeating this observation even with the most sincere intent to inform, as opposed to persuade, renders the profiler and interpreter as a psychological warfare tool.

Sarhan and Al Khatib describe the Intifada not only as psychological warfare but also as chemical and biological warfare. Specifically, they assert that the Intifada helps induce anxiety and fear and is causally related to increases in anxiolytic psychochemotherapy among Israelis. The political fallout is surely noteworthy of having even support personnel to a side of a conflict willingly ingesting chemicals that can have physical and mental side-effects incompatible with intrapsychic and behavioral skills compatible with political success. It is even more noteworthy that some of the anxiety and fear stems from and/or weakens existential concerns including Israeli beliefs about the validity and legitimacy of Zionism and the Israeli nation-state. Here the intimation is that psychological warfare may necessarily relate to two other warfares termed weapons of mass destruction..

Sarhan and Al Khatib otherwise describe how the presence or absence of specific descriptors may have surprisingly complicated political consequences. They seem to suggest that a trend from "occupied territories" through "disputed territories" to "territories" increases vagueness of determinations of "fairness and justice"--perhaps implying that the "Palestinian" side thereby loses international political support. However, one could note that a reality wherein both "Palestinians" and Israelis are contesting over "territories" may suggest that the territories in question are already possessed by the Palestinians without the "occupied" facts on the ground legitimacy that might be ascribed to the Israelis.

In another example, Sarhan and Al-Khatib seem to imply that Israeli mass media descriptions--of Israeli fatalities with many individual details and of "Palestinian" fatalities with virtually none--besmirch "Palestinian" perpetrators as less legitimate and more "terrorist" and benignly type Israeli perpetrators are retaliating and fighting back. The authors might also have noted that the language might facilitate further Israeli attacks through dehumanization of the adversary and impeded Palestinians attacks through personalization of the adversary. However, a counter to this last observation is that in the Mideast killing fields, common social psychological findings may have limited validity--e.g., personalization of a target making that target more psychologically and politically attractive.

Perhaps the greatest compliment to Sarhan and Al Khatib is that one can agree on their essential points but vehemently disagree on their final political conclusions. They assert that it must be illusory and delusional to describe "constriction and impoverishment of thousands of people [Palestinian]" as "self-defence [Israeli]." They assert that putative [Palestinian] "violence and terrorism" are actually

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"[Palestinian] acts of liberation against "[Israeli] occupation and colonialism." Some readers may differ with this political stance. Yet none might quibble with the assertion that we all are political prisoners to language much as language is a political prisoner to us. (See Dale, S.F. (1988). Religious suicide in Islamic Asia: Anticolonial terrorism in India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 32, 37-59; Hazani, M. (1993). Sacrifical immortality: Towards a theory of suicidal terrorism ands related phenomena. In L.B. Boyer, & R.M. Boyer (Eds.). The psychoanalytic study of society: Essays in honor of Alan Dundes. Analytic Press, Inc.; Le Bon, G. (1980). The French Revolution and the Psychology of Revolution. Transaction Books; Lutz, C. (1997). Epistemology of the bunker: The brainwashed and other new subjects of permanent war. In J. Pfister, & N. Schnog (Eds.). Inventing the psychological: Toward a cultural history of emotional life in America. Yale University Press; Martin-Baro, I. (1990). Religion as an instrument of psychological warfare. Journal of Social Issues, 46, 93-107; Sarhan, W., & Al Khatib, J. (August 15, 2001). A psychological profile of the Intifada. The Jordan Times, http://www.jordantimes.com; Wundt, W. (1916). Elements of folk psychology. NY: Macmillan.) (Keywords: Israel, Mideast, Palestinian National Authority, Terrorism.)

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