

Paper proposal: research workshop “Palestine Under Occupation: The Legitimation of Violence and the Violence of Legitimation”, Queen Mary, University of London, 26 May 2017.

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“ Hamas is ISIS. ISIS is Hamas ”: The historical emergence of terrorism narratives to legitimize anti-Palestinian violence

Abstract

“The simple truth: Hamas is ISIS. ISIS is Hamas.” This palindrome was tweeted by Benjamin Netanyahu in August 2014, the day after ISIS published a video of the group beheading American journalist James Foley. Since then, the Israeli Prime Minister has consistently tried to depict Hamas as part of the same global threat as ISIS to de-legitimize the Palestinians politically and legitimize the use of violence against them.

While Hamas and especially ISIS are newer names, the underlying discursive strategy to frame the Palestinian political leadership as part of a barbaric, centrally directed global terror network aiming to destroy Western civilization emerged as early as the late 1970s. At a moment when the Israeli government faced increasing international pressure, with even the Carter administration publicly criticizing it for its human rights violation and violence against Palestinians, political elites in Israel began portraying the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a central pillar in a vast international network of terrorist organizations directed by the Soviet Union. A watershed event for the formation and dissemination of this narrative was a conference on “international terrorism” held in Jerusalem in July 1979. The conference organizer was no one else than Benjamin Netanyahu, who privately explained the aim of the conference: to “alter the public perception” of the Palestinian problem – as one of Soviet-directed terrorism – and how to deal with it accordingly.

The proposed paper will analyze the emergence, spreading and significance of this powerful narrative and inquire how specifically it served to delegitimize the PLO and to legitimate violence against the Palestinians. Its international influence, especially on the Reagan administration, will be illustrated. Additionally, continuities into the present will be crystalized that go beyond the person of Netanyahu, as the same discursive strategies are still exploited and politically relevant today.

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