I Am Not My Own: A Review of Barbara Victor's *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*

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Introduction

One haunting picture of a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon shows two children, no more than 10, carrying water as they return to their encampment. They do so under the watchful eye of Ali Obaida, spokesperson of the Qassam Brigades, his visage painted on a mural. The Qassam Brigades is Hamas' blunt weapon, and Obaida stands as the symbol of ultimate resistance in its perpetual war against Israel's very existence.[1] This image of the fiery speaker, identity unknown, his face permanently hidden by a red keffiyeh, has become for many young refugees languishing in camps spread throughout the Lebanese landscape, a symbol of hope — a marker for the possibility of one day returning to the Palestinian homeland.

It thus comes as no surprise that Obaida is omnipresent throughout these places, where hope has become an afterthought. What remains is a generation of young Palestinians being recruited by Hamas (Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-ʾIslāmiyyah or the Islamic Resistance) to fight their Israeli oppressors seduced into joining the ranks of the Brigade. According to the New York Times, recruits into the Qassam Brigade have spiked following Hamas's October 7 attack on an Israeli concert, where numerous hostages were taken.

1 See Maria Abi-Habib and Hwaida Saad. 2024. "In a Grim Palestinian Refugee Community, People See Hope in Hamas." *The New York Times* 24 August 2024. in https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/24/world/middleeast/palestinian-refugees-hamas-lebanon.html Last accessed 1 September 2024.

台灣人權學刊 第七卷第四期
2024 年 11 月　頁 185~196

Given Hamas' 'success', many among the refugee community were awash with a renewed sense of solidarity with the group, inspiring more to take up arms against Israel in a battle against the Middle Eastern Goliath.

In this conflict, there has long been a fraught pattern of many young Palestinians participating in both Intifadas wanting to be martyred or shahid. Following Hamas' attack, they and other like-minded organizations can pick and choose from a never-ending stream of refugees willingly joining the ranks of militant groups against Israel. But amidst the headlines of brutal Israeli ground attacks, airstrikes, and the subsequent casualties, we are rarely given a glimpse of the world these refugees inhabit and the places where many would-be martyrs are recruited.

The Ein El Hilweh refugee camp in Lebanon is described in the article as one such spot where Hamas is especially influential. Covering 1.5 square kilometers, it is home to nearly 80,000 people, where different internecine groups vie for power. According to a report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the inhabitants of this particular camp "…suffer from high rates of poverty and unemployment and remain heavily dependent on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and NGO services for housing, healthcare, and education" (OCHA, 2017). Unfortunately, such circumstances are not unique to this one camp. It can be surmised that thousands of other refugee camps are also similar in nature.

One must bear in mind that under such circumstances, poverty and squalor seep deep into the refugee psyche and are passed from one generation to the next. The pain and suffering are remembered from individual to individual. Similarly, as more and more settlers move into the West Bank and Gaza Strip, displacing many Palestinians living there through the tacit approval of the Israeli authorities, alienation becomes an increasingly powerful lived experience for many refugees.

Benedict Anderson's (2016) notion of the imagined community has, in this sense, never been so prescient. The Palestinian experience encompasses a state of being stateless, living in conditions where one's homeland is a constantly unreachable place seen from afar. It is tragically an object that has the essence of having been taken or stolen, and this sentiment is shared among the refugee community. In the writings of Kamran Mehrava, he laments that "…not only is Palestine territorially non-contiguous and no longer viable as a physical entity, but the very fibers and ingredients

that would constitute it as a national and political whole have mutated in such a way as to make state- and nation-building improbable." (Kamrava, 2016). While he maintains that Palestine is 'impossible', it is certainly not improbable. Nations live in the deep recesses of memory, providing individuals and groups, even in the darkest of nights, an intangible hope that one day becomes a reality.

Onto the Anvil

This is perhaps the very spark that continues to live on in the hearts of many Palestinians, whether in the diaspora, refugee camps, or even within Israel, providing an explanation as to why, even after spending nearly all his life in carceral conditions, Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar continues to be a believer. Touted as the architect behind the October 7th attacks, Yahya was born in a refugee camp similar to Ein EI Hilweh and spent decades in Israeli jails after being accused of killing Palestinian collaborators. However, Yahya made full use of his time in prison to organize and hone the leadership skills needed to lead Hamas. His predecessor, Ismail Haniyeh, assassinated by the Israelis, was similarly shaped by his experiences growing up in a refugee camp.

These camps, therefore, became anvils for Hamas recruits, and Benyamin Netanyahu's military strategy for its 'complete destruction' is an exercise in futility.[2] The Islamist organization inhabits a shapeless, imagined realm fueled by conflict, poverty, and dreams of Palestinian statehood, even in the most desperate of times. The further the Israeli war machine punishes the Palestinians, the more they are pushed into the arms of Hamas. The constant bombardment, destruction and bureaucratic violence imposed upon them have led Palestinians to adopt less conventional forms of warfare. Since they are unable to respond with rocket attacks or other sophisticated weaponry, it is not uncommon to see young men launching counterattacks with slingshots and rocks.

As the conflict wore on Hamas and other organizations, including Fatah, began improvising and expanding the use of the human body as a weapon of war. The individual was no longer considered a soldier with a weapon in

2 See Bethan McKernan. 2024. "Benjamin Netanyahu insists on Hamas 'destruction' as part of plan to end Gaza war." *The Guardian* 1 June 2024. in https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/01/no-end-to-gaza-war-until-destruction-of-hamas-says-netanyahu-israel Last accessed 23 August 2024.

hand but was to become an explosive device in and of itself. Hamas, and even the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), capitalized on the concept of the *shahid* or martyr to inspire militants to turn their bodies into weapons of war. Strapped with explosives, individual suicide bombers would rush toward Israeli soldiers and civilians, detonating themselves and killing those they deemed enemies. These acts were engineered not only to inflict maximum physical damage but also to create psychological shockwaves of fear among their targets, and practitioners have made full use of this 'tactical advantage'.

With this new form of warfare, Hamas began recruiting not only men but also women, who were often not seen as 'traditional' combatants in its war against the Israelis. With their inclusion in this war, the roles typically ascribed to females in a traditional and conservative social milieu, such as Palestine, also began to change. A glimpse of this is offered in Barbara Victor's book, where she traces the journey of several women who later became what the then Fatah leader Yasser Arafat referred to as the 'Army of Roses'.

A Brief History

Though the book was written more than two decades ago, it still presents readers with a visceral view of the Palestinian struggle to have their presence recognized and their rights enshrined. Generations of Palestinians have been forced into exile, becoming refugees during the 1948 war when the victorious World War II Western states dictated the beginning of a Jewish state. Referred to as the catastrophe or the *Nakba* close to 700,000 Palestinian Arabs were displaced. Those who chose to stay were later incorporated into what would become the state of Israel, but those who were expelled went on to form refugee colonies, and now number nearly 5 million, according to the United Nations.

Throughout the nearly eight decades following the events of the *Nakba* in 1948, modern Palestinian history has been nothing short of a tragedy, where attempts at forging a state have been foiled in one way or another by Israel. A response to this was the Oslo Peace Accords, where both sides of the conflict would work toward the possibility of two sovereign, legitimate states. All of this came to a boil during the first Intifada or uprising, where Palestinians living in and around Israel rose up to challenge the mistreatment they suffered at the hands of the Israelis. A response to this was the Oslo Peace

Accords, where both sides of the conflict would work toward the possibility of two sovereign, legitimate states. The signing of the accords was depicted in a photograph with an awkward Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin grimacing as he shook hands with the PLO's Yasser Arafat, while former U.S. President Bill Clinton looked on triumphantly.

However, as the accords fell apart over the decade, Palestinian frustration boiled over into the second Intifada. Despite the promises made, the Palestinians did not experience any discernable change in their lives or livelihoods. Blockades, lockdowns, and severe restrictions continued to be a daily part of life, compounding their sense of powerlessness. Events in Palestine reach a breaking point when young people initiated the second Intifada following the controversial visit of Israeli politician Ariel Sharon[3] to the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

It is within this context that Barbara Victor begins her story of what Arafat would refer to as his 'army of roses'. Victor's tome shuffles between the lives of female suicide bombers and the larger political forces at play as they plunge headlong into their fates as *shahids*, or martyrs. The book is sparse on the historical details of the Palestinian experience but more than makes up for this as she describes the lives, dynamics, and motivations behind the actions of these suicide bombers.

Focusing on an immediate post-second Intifada moment, Victor places into stark view the machinations of the PLO as well as Hamas, as they weaponize their followers against the Israelis. As the resistance against the Israelis dragged on, with the Oslo Accords seeming more like empty promises, Arafat, in Victor's description, appears as a lonely actor, losing his appeal among the Palestinians. Politically waning, Arafat stood accused of corruption and worse, compromising with the Israelis. Hamas, on the other hand, was gaining the upper hand in winning the hearts and minds of the Palestinians through a dangerous formula of religion and nationalism.

While so-called terrorism experts are quick to accuse Hamas of being a fanatical ethno-religious death cult, the organization has an established status among Palestinians in refugee camps as being the only institution with

3 Sharon's presence at the Al-Aqsa Mosque was particularly offensive to Palestinian Muslims because of the role he played in the massacre of refugees at a camp in 1982. See Suzanne Goldenberg. 2000. "Rioting as Sharon visits Islam holy site." *The Guardian* 29 September 2000. in https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/sep/29/israel. Last accessed 20 August 2024.

enough capacity to offer basic necessities such as health care and education. In essence, Hamas operates as a state in the absence of a functioning one. This model is often used throughout the Middle East and is inspired by the Ikhwan al-Muslimin, or the Muslim Brotherhood. Much like in Egypt, the Brotherhood essentially became a shadow state, existing alongside, if not in the shadow of, the official state.

According to political observers, Hamas, "…in many cases rivalled the services provided by the official Palestinian Authority (PA), the United Nations and humanitarian organizations" (Milton-Edwards & Farrell, 2010: 5). Because of this, Hamas was successful in wresting control of Gaza from Arafat's Fatah, which many in the Palestinian electorate viewed as being in a state of decay. What followed was an intensification of the rivalry between these two political players, both vying for hearts and minds in a tense political environment. As both Fatah and Hamas were intent on proving their continued relevance in the face of Palestinian suffering, both sides began a new and novel form of campaigning.

Wafa's Tale

Wafa Idris, a *shadida* or martyr, would go on to become the first female suicide bomber in the heady days following the second Intifada. In Victor's book, Wafa is the martyr par excellence and embodies the ideals of Palestine's continued struggle against the Israelis. Her image, put up immediately after her death, became an inspiration for many women after her to also become martyrs, introducing a new phenomenon where previously only Palestinian men were allowed to give up their lives in pursuit of liberty and the divine.

In a detailed description of the lives of female suicide bombers, the reader is immersed, through the language employed by Victor, in the oppressive environments these women live in. The ever-present war, the lack of opportunities, and the demands placed on them by a deeply patriarchal society are the very elements that drive these women to arm themselves with explosives and ultimately blow themselves up in crowded places. Wafa, who did so in 2006, carried a 10 kg explosive device in her backpack, which, when detonated, killed one person and injured hundreds in a crowded area in Jerusalem. Many celebrated the 26-year-old's martyrdom, seeing it as a small victory in the greater struggle against the Israeli behemoth.

One poignant scene, however, is when Wafa's mother passes out candy

to celebratory crowds, despite mourning the death of her child. This points to the contradictory consequences of Wafa's singular act of violence against the Israelis and raises questions about what led her to take her own life as well as the lives of others.

Outside her home Wafa's work with the Red Crescent allowed her to provide care and relief to those injured by Israeli aggression, but the conflict had also impacted her family. Wafa had one brother in jail for being a member of Fatah, and visiting him was a gargantuan task given the restrictions placed upon them. This also meant that other members of the family were unable to work. The reality of living under Israeli military rule is one where the occupation is designed not only to suppress but to stifle and suffocate the Palestinians until there is no breathing space left. And this went on for generations including that of Wafa's family, who became refugees after the *Nakba* in 1948.

Wafa's life, in essence, was never truly her own. Many of her generation felt the oppressive hand of Israeli occupation, and it was possibly only during the first Intifada that the Palestinians imagined a nation, albeit one founded on suffering. As the first Intifada later led on to the second, Yasser Arafat spoke out about the need for more to join its ranks. Among the thousands gathered to hear the grand old man of Palestinian resistance, he uttered, "… You are the hope of Palestine. You will liberate your husbands, fathers, and sons from oppression. You will sacrifice the way you, women, have always sacrificed for your family" (Victor, 2004: 20).

In what is often considered a conservative milieu, Palestinian women are often expected to perform their 'duties', but in the context of Israeli aggression, their role is conflated and extended to include resistance against the Israelis. Nevertheless, even with Arafat's rousing speech, the appearance of the female suicide bomber was disconcerting to both his Fatah faction and Hamas. Conservative clerics believed that martyrdom belonged exclusively to men. So even after Wafa killed herself, both political factions were wary of recognizing her martyrdom. However, as news of her death spread and its political value became evident, Wafa's martyrdom provided a needed morale boost for the resistance.

Regardless, the reader is left to ponder whether Wafa's suicide was motivated by her nationalism and anger toward the Israelis, or whether it was driven by deeper personal issues. In the book, it is later revealed that Wafa

was deeply affected by the breakdown of her marriage, caused ostensibly by her inability to bear a child. The pressure, as Victor states, became unbearable, as she was seen by those in her community as being 'sterile' and thus "…an incomplete woman, unable to bear children, unable to provide soldiers to fight the Israeli occupation" (2003: 50). In the absence of a child, she instead had to make do with her own body. But even if she had been able to give birth, it is likely that the world her child would have been born into would be defined by violence, deprivation, and oppression.

A Mother's Tale

Moving through Victor's broken Palestinian landscape, we then encounter Um Nidal, the mother of 17-year-old suicide bomber Mahmoud Farhat.[4] Better known as Mariam Farhat, she would go on to become a prominent legislator in the Gaza Strip. However, what made her infamous was a video of her kissing and hugging her son before he went on a shooting rampage in a Jewish settlement in 2000. Mahmoud was one of a brood of 12 who had successfully martyred themselves in attacks against Israeli citizens, earning Um Nidal the moniker 'Mother of Martyrs'. In the video, Victor further details that "…one of the most shocking moments in the video…" is when she "…kneels on the floor beside her son. Covering his face with kisses, she sits up and raises her hands in a gesture of praise. Her face is covered with her son's blood" (2003: 167).

According to Victor, Mahmoud was a martyr in the making, having failed several attempts at martyrdom. Nevertheless, Mahmoud persevered with the encouragement of his mother. Victor quotes Mariam as saying, "I would tell him that an opportunity would happen and to be patient, plan well, so that he wouldn't act in vain" (2003: 169). Her encouragement was based on her belief that she, as well as the lives of her sons, were part of a grander scheme to combat the injustices wrought upon them by the Israelis. As Victor writes, the life of Mariam and her children have been nothing but a sequence of violence perpetrated against their family. The Israeli security forces were never far away, harassing, imprisoning, and ultimately killing her children.

4 For more information, see William Yardley. 2013. "Mariam Farhat, Palestinian 'Mother of Martyrs', dies at 64." *The New York Times* 20 March 2013. in https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/20/world/middleeast/mariam-farhat-palestinian-mother-of-martyrs-dies-at-64.html#. Last accessed 19 July 2024.

Mahmoud himself witnessed the power of Israeli security forces when they murdered a Hamas member in the house where they lived.

Notions of loss, patriotism, and the punitive actions of Israeli security forces have created, according to Nasser Abufarha, 'semiotic' conditions conducive to forming this 'army of roses'. Since the Palestinian homeland must be 're-built' in light of its destruction by the Israelis, Abufarha's ethnography states that it must be re-imagined through the spilling of martyrs' blood. Instead of "shahid", Abufarha uses the term "istishadi", where the martyr is not so much a victim but rather a hero, an active agent. He adds that "… the more istishhadiyeen are sacrificed for the land, the more the land becomes sacred, requiring more sacrifice to save it or honor it" (Abufarha, 2009: 13). He continues, "…the exchange of blood constitutes a 'blood covenant' that fuses human life with the addressed party — the land, the place, or divine life on the one hand — and an exchange between the sacrificed body parts and the land of Palestine on the other…" (2009: 14). Doing so asserts their identity as Palestinians, as their blood proves the existence of Palestine, even as it is being wiped away by Israeli settlers and soldiers.

Beyond the rhetoric and the 'habitus' that the suicide bombers inhabit, there is no denying the psychic bond between mother and child. In one especially poignant moment in the book, Victor asks Mariam how she gathered enough courage to send her son to be martyred after carrying him for nine months. Victor describes Mariam's reaction: "…she pauses and seems to have trouble breathing. Tears well up in her eyes, she covers her face with her hands, and weeps. Several moments pass before she looks up again. She can't answer." (Victor, 2003: 173)

Tales of the Heart

In such circumstances, the book reveals the scope of the human tragedy of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and reminds us that the nature of war is like an ever-hungry beast, consuming not only human bodies but the opportunity to be human. It is unfortunate that the human stories Victor highlights in this book are not only specific to the Palestinian context, but are universal in the sense that in war, our bodies are not our own. They are sacrificed in the name of religion, nation, and even the future of generations to come, will similarly disappear in the shadow of conflict.

One of the strengths of Victor's book is its ability to show the nuanced nature of being human. The depth of research Victor conducted allows us to see distinct rays of light shining through, even in the darkest moments of this conflict. This is not something she elaborates on, unfortunately, but it has the positive effect of leaving it to the reader to determine what to take away from these small hidden episodes in the book.

In the aftermath of a bombing perpetrated by Izzidine Masri in a Jerusalem restaurant, Victor tells the story of one of the victims who remained in a coma for weeks before passing aways. She states, "…his wife had made the decision that when he died, which was inevitable given the extent of his head injuries, she would donate his organs" (2003: 155). The wife later received a call from the hospital, asking if she had any objections to her husband's heart being donated to a Palestinian man. Agreeing to this, the wife then met the recipient of her husband's heart and his wife. As they embraced each other, the "…scene in his hospital room was one of those moments when blood feuds, biblical prophesies, and political grievances disintegrate under the weight of pure human emotion" (2003: 155).

The story of the Palestinians is inadvertently the story of a people whose fate for nearly a century is not one of their own making. Victor's book reminds us of life in the Palestinian microcosm, even as Israeli aggression continues against them. Beyond the headlines and the daily reports from major news agencies on casualties inflicted by the Israelis or even of the scenes of havoc and chaos caused by another suicide bomber, there is essentially a grand human tragedy occuring. Stories of hope highlighted will inadvertently disappear under the weight of atrocities committed, and that sense of a common humanity will ultimately be lost.

Many Palestinian men and women will continue to live under conditions that force them to seek empowerment, and one such option may be to pick up arms or become a weapon themselves. These individual stories are important as they remind us of the possibility of eschewing violence and revenge, and of seeking ways to reach out. The book also reminds us of the need to define for ourselves who we are and not allow states, organizations, groups, or sectarian interests to do so for us. After all, it is a human heart that beats in all of us.

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