

In Praise of Point-Blank

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Abstract

The Dignity (al-Karama) Uprising of May of 2021 broke many “rules of engagement” between Palestinians and the settler state of Israel, including that of sarcasm and humor. Spreading swiftly from Jerusalem to all of historic Palestine, the uprising defied co-optation by the Palestinian Authority, an entity that has long maintained a buffer between its people and the settler state. Hence, and throughout the confrontations, a point-blank range was created allowing for the usage of all sorts of “weapons” in the Palestinian people’s humble arsenal, humor included. This essay, originally written during the uprising and in Arabic, records the Palestinians’ ability to ridicule the Israeli settler violence to which it is subjected, through black comedy – “sprinkling sugar on their own death.” By contextualizing the grand event of 2021 politically and culturally, and de-theorizing humor to its core, this article brings to the historical record the Jerusalemites’ invention of “red humor,” colored with their blood, that appeared in different performative acts targeting Israeli human power; military machinery; repressive policies; and modes of “negotiation.” Tracing the “black” into the “red” in expressions of humor as a tool in the arsenal of this uprising offers a record of a powerful, and often used, means of empowerment and resistance for Palestinians.

Keywords

Al-Karama Uprising (2021); Palestine; Jerusalem; sarcasm; humor; resistance.

In Palestine, sarcasm is an act of revolutionary beauty. In Palestine, the saying “sprinkle sugar on death” is used for ridiculing settler violence through black comedy. In Palestine, the leadership has been made irrelevant and has actually turned itself into a joke. In Palestine, the masses have gone into battle with the enemy forces and made them a subject of mockery. Between the leadership and its Arab counterparts, on the one hand, and the people, on the other, there is a moral testing ground: Jerusalem. It is the space where falsehood is laid bare, where you can tell the sheep from the goats. Whoever today does not love Jerusalem’s defenders, standing by them wholeheartedly, has no heart. This is an occasion to praise “red” humor performed by Palestinians through their intimacy with the enemy at point-blank range. This is an occasion, as well, to say – about the experience of the intifada; the rules of engagement; the performances of humor; and the observance of their goals – between aesthetics and agency, that derision achieves its noble mission.

In the cramped enclaves of the West Bank, which the enemy has called the “Areas of the Palestinian Authority,” the bitter fruit of the Oslo accords ripened, resulting in the aborting of the intifada path – in thought, practice, and structure – by agents who blocked their oppressed people from confronting their aggressive arrogant enemy. They allowed the enemy safe entrances, by submitting and coordinating, to carry out its continuous violations: abuse, arrest, and demolition. They tried to impose the irrational logic of “pacifism” in confronting the enemy – the enemy of the people, not the enemy of the authority. By complying with the rules of soft confrontation, these agents became the obstacle that prevented the possibility of engagement with the enemy at point-blank range. They became its “Silk Wall” and its “Good Fence” at the same time, by promising the enemy – a promise that will be forever kept in their defeat registry – that a new intifada will not be allowed while they are “in office.” Meanwhile, the enemy, satisfied with the performance of its agents, keeps its prized “Iron Wall.”

In besieged Gaza, despite the valiant efforts of deterrence by the Palestinian resistance with iron and fire, the “wire” (*al-silk*) deprived the people of Gaza, too, of intimate engagement with the enemy at point-blank range, except in moments of military battle and in the Marches of Return, which have not yet achieved their goal. Despite all of this, resistance in these two geographies has not diminished. This is due to the conviction of the oppressed Palestinians that the Zionist settler-colonial state is an absolute evil, and is proceeding with its campaign of ethnic cleansing under the belief that “the 1948 war has not ended,” meaning that it will not end until Palestine is cleansed of its original inhabitants.

Palestinians in Jerusalem, the city of the prophets, and in the rest of Palestine occupied in 1948 are more fortunate than others; they have maintained an intimate point-blank engagement with the enemy. Despite the centralization of the Zionist security apparatus (the army, the police, and various intelligence services), and its sub-units, the settler-colonial divisions of historic Palestine imposed some divergence

in the “application” of the rules of engagement. Put differently, “dealing” with the Palestinians depends on the contrived “legal status” of the Palestinians of Jerusalem and the areas of Palestine occupied in 1948, although it is certainly not related to different standards of fascism, or the range of Israeli brutality.

In Jerusalem – where there is no “Palestinian Authority-without-authority,” no “Silk Walls,” no “Good Fences” separating the oppressor from the oppressed, and no pledge from the “guardian” that a new intifada will not be allowed – the point-blank advantage has enabled crucial achievements to be made, not only at the level of protecting Jerusalem and Jerusalemites, but also at the level of demeaning and destroying the image of the enemy. This has raised Palestinians’ morale in the face of one of the most powerful and brutal security structures in the world, as Palestinians resist with their bare chests and the power of justice. The fierce confrontations at Bab al-‘Amud (Damascus Gate), Shaykh Jarrah, and al-Aqsa Mosque are now presenting a rare phenomenon: repetitious scenes of taunts and ridicule against enemy soldiers, officers, and its entire security regime. After achieving their minimum goal of recording swift victories at the moment of confrontation, Palestinians invested in these scenes. They documented these moments of triumph in audio and visual form, and worked to promote them to achieve their ultimate goal of raising morale and forging cohesion.

The investment did not stop at shattering the image of a soldier heavily armed with weapons and fascism, a monstrous bogeyman who commands and is to be obeyed, threatening violence that cannot be repelled. It went beyond that – toward making the soldier an object for instinctive mockery, and the resulting spectacle opened a literal floodgate to silence their waves of brutality. These two creations of mockery and spectacle, which the Palestinians have the right to record as a Jerusalemite invention, made into “red” humor by the color of their blood, appeared in four performative forms targeting: the enemy’s human power; its military machinery; its repressive policies (movement restrictions, street brutality, and arrests); and the art of “negotiating” in a life that knows nothing but one-sided confrontation.

At the level of human power, Jerusalemites deliberately clashed with Israeli occupation forces and settlers from a point-blank distance, and delivered direct blows to the enemy’s faces and heads. This street fighting style breaks the “power” of the military uniform and the “integrity” of the weapon, which becomes useless when he falls in the dirt.

Recordings of particular incidents spread: of a young Palestinian boy slapping an extremist settler on the train that cuts through Jerusalem; of others kicking a settler whose legs couldn’t help him after he dared to come to al-Musrara neighborhood; of a boy who hits a soldier from the “Border Police” directly in the face with a stone, leaving him writhing in pain and bleeding amid the cheers of those at the top of the Bab al-‘Amud stairs; of a young man who jumps on the heads of occupation forces at the bottom of the Bab al-‘Amud stairs after Israeli soldiers erected barriers to prevent people from reaching al-Aqsa Mosque to pray; of a group of youth smashing the faces of two Zionist soldiers in al-‘Isawiyya after they tried to arrest one of their comrades; of members of an entire Israeli police unit who were unable to force a physically fit

Palestinian youth into the car during his arrest; of another young man confronting the occupation soldiers at one of the gates of al-Aqsa Mosque, challenging one of them to lay down his weapon, and threatening that he will “split him in half”; and of a young woman who literally wiped the floor by dragging an Israeli policewoman by her hair when she attacked a group of Jerusalemite women sitting on a bench inside the Old City in a previous confrontation.

As for military machinery, Jerusalemites have turned it into a mobile theater of spontaneous spectacles: youth have mocked the sewage water cannons by inventing an air freshener; a young man raised the Palestinian flag on top of an Israeli police car in Bab al-Wad entrance to Jerusalem after Jerusalemites succeeded in *faz‘a* (rescuing) their compatriots coming from the Galilee, the Northern Triangle, and Bir al-Saba‘ on their way toward al-Aqsa Mosque after the occupation forces blocked the road to prevent their buses from passing. Not only did the youth carry their comrades into the heart of Jerusalem in their cars, they also closed the Jaffa–Jerusalem Road at Bab al-Wad, the main road leading to “Tel Aviv,” for four hours; and a young man tore the Israeli flag off a settler’s car on the Lifta–Bayt Hanina Road (“Begin Road”), and defied another settler who expressed his displeasure. Another young man broke the windows of an Israeli police car with a kick in streetfight style near Salah al-Din Street. Prior to the Bab al-‘Amud uprising, a sarcastic Jerusalemite tried to climb into the front seat of a police car during his arrest along with a group of his companions; and others looted tools of oppression, including sticks and helmets used during the confrontation inside the walls of al-Aqsa Mosque.

As for the enemy’s repressive policies, the iconic images of smiling Palestinians during moments of arrest astonished the world, while expressions of fear, confusion, and panic appeared on the faces of heavily armed soldiers. Those arrested hear the calm expressions of nonchalance from their comrades: “It will be easy,” while the detainee shouts, “al-Quds ‘Arabiyya” (Jerusalem is Arab). Along with these revolutionary smiles, news spread of the arrest of a young man from the Old City during which his daughter asks him about her “white toy.” He smiles as he exits the door of his house facing his child and family, while the unit officer asks him, in Hebrew: “Your child?” He responds: “Yes.” The officer says, “She’s grown up!” The father replies: “Thank God.” The officer then comments: “Your child should not see your arrest,” and asks the parents to close the door! This incident was preceded by scenes of a boy giving his comrade one last “drag on the *argila*,” as the soldiers arrested him in an Old City alley. A child “storms” the enemy’s makeshift police bunker located to the left of the Bab al-‘Amud stairs. This provokes the unit’s members, one of whom tries to catch the boy, who jumps away with a sarcastic acrobatic movement. The children and all of those present laugh heartily, and the policeman returns disappointed.

In another scene at the same police bunker, a child points his plastic toy machine gun at the soldiers. The officer is provoked, and he asks the boy’s father why he is teaching his son such actions. The father replies that the child knows by himself and no one taught him. The officer tries to shake hands with the child, but the child refuses, and raises his plastic gun again, so the officer withdraws, disappointed. Dozens of soldiers

barricaded in a metal barrier under the arch of Bab al-‘Amud begrudgingly allowed a child under the age of seven to pass during a night of confrontation. The most foolish of them slaps the child on his neck, after which the child distances himself about two meters, secures his lollipop in his mouth, and hits the soldier directly in the face with his shoe. The children conclude another scene by collecting remnants of gas and stun grenades inside the courtyards of al-Aqsa Mosque, use them to draw a map of their country, Palestine, and the Dome of the Rock, and write: “You will not pass.”

As for the art of “negotiation” in a life that does not allow negotiating, the scene of a conversation spread between a Jerusalemite boy and a Zionist officer who tried to persuade a group of youth, in the middle of the uprising, to leave the stairs of Bab al-‘Amud and enjoy the atmosphere of Ramadan in the square. The boy replies: “We can only enjoy Ramadan on the stairs.” Another soldier negotiates with an elderly Jerusalemite to leave the stairs on a Ramadan evening, and he replies that he needs a quarter of an hour to drink his coffee in the “proper place – Bab al-‘Amud.” In another scene, an elderly man prays to God and invites the enemy soldiers to chant “Amen.” Another old man, Nabil al-Kurd, frightens a settler at the entrance to the occupied Ghawi house in Shaykh Jarrah by play-acting a nonsense reaction, driving the young settler to retreat with fearful trembling. A Hebronite-Jerusalemite tries to convince a soldier not to arrest a young man from the neighborhood, warning him that the young man would beat him. He warns him very seriously, but in a comical manner using the distinctive Hebronite-Jerusalem dialectic of elongated vowels: “I am saying this for youuuu! He will beat you up, I swear to God, he is crazy, man, I swear he’ll beat you up! I’m saying this for youuuu! Listen, I swear to God, the people of Jerusalem are nuts, man! I swear to God, you will never figure them out! This means that he’ll hit you and get locked up, he doesn’t give a damn!” A lawyer from Umm al-Fahm embodied street justice against an overweight settler who came with a group of his friends to storm the police roadblock installed at the entrance of Shaykh Jarrah. The settler had used pepper spray in the eyes of the protesters the day before. The lawyer recognized him, challenged the police to let him enter, continued to record him on the cell phone, exposing him, and then taunted him in Hebrew: “Raise your hand if you are a man!” And youth respond to the text messages from the enemy’s intelligence services threatening to prosecute those who have been identified as having participated in “violence at al-Aqsa Mosque,” by saying: “You have been recognized as having participated in acts of repression of worshipers in al-Aqsa Mosque. We will charge you. The youth of Jerusalem” ... and so on, and so forth.

These incidents are not only events, but constitute historical evidence that write history while it is being lived. I am not writing here to analyze, but rather to raise the banner of confrontation and contemplate its abundant spaces. It is not wrong to say that the theoretical frameworks that explain social and political humor, white or black, and that have taken shape since the 1940s in a historical framework, may not be enough to explain the red revolutionary humor produced by the Jerusalem uprising. Cultural studies have been preoccupied with: analyzing the impact of humor on individuals and groups; monitoring its function in shaping and consolidating political

and national consciousness; analyzing the rhetorical grammar of satire, specifically in the audio-visual fields; and investigating the thematic content in terms of political messages, through examining the image of reality, the moral message, and the means of metaphorical imagination.

Theories of humor, which are necessarily heterogeneous, are based on three general categories that govern the relationship between two parties in a state of dissonance: collision, superiority, and catharsis. Where the two parties “communicate,” verbally or physically, the expected collides with the unexpected, whereby the comic situation begins to take shape and the succession of details breaks the monotony of the persistent “normative principle” in the mind of the viewer about the usual outcomes in similar circumstances. With the end of the event, the “paradoxical principle” is established. Here, the viewer sees that the “ordinary” sequence led to an “unusual” result through what was caused by the textual contradiction between the normative and the paradoxical, which releases the trigger of astonishment. As a result, the contradiction turns into humor, humor turns into laughter, and laughter turns into a productive revolutionary spectacle.

“Facing” is only called “facing” when faces are against each other, literally butting foreheads, staring into your enemy’s eye, with an intense gaze that penetrates his pupils. This confrontation, from point-blank range, never ceases to raise the morale of Jerusalemites. It strips the Zionist of the aura of the beast-machine-anonymity that has so far succeeded in evading accountability, while acting as a cog in the machine of the savage enemy state. But “revolutionary intimacy” reveals the cowardly person inside the cowardly Zionist, rendering them susceptible to confrontation, capable of defeat, subject to harassment, and subject to revenge. Within this confrontation, the lesson that philosophy teaches us is that the human and the inhuman are inseparable or rather they overlap at the moment of engagement. They are closely fused in battle, neither morally intersecting, nor equivalent.

With their smiles and red humor facing the fascist enemy’s policies and practices, Jerusalemites transcend the confrontation production of Palestinian culture: from Ibrahim Tuqan’s melody in which he states: “When danger loomed, he smiled/ and when the battle raged, he attacked,” to Mahmud Darwish’s words of those who “ascend to their death smiling.” The only poetry that can capture Jerusalemites’s bravery might be the song of Ibrahim al-Salih (Abu ‘Arab): “as much as death was in awe of us as fearless heroes, he swore unto God’s throne that he must befriend us.” Neither fear nor danger, then, hold the poetics of Palestine. Rather we sprinkle sugar on death.

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