

# Targeting the Innocent -- July 31, 2002

## By Starhawk

Lisa and I are walking in the "Zone of Total Destruction" in Jenin Camp, where in April the Israeli Defence Forces, after four nights of shelling, bulldozed 450 houses, some with the occupants still inside. We are in Jenin, in the Occupied Territories of Palestine, with the International Solidarity Movement, a group that supports nonviolent resistance and attempts to protect noncombatants.

The rubble is piled two and three stories high over the area of a football field. Paths wind through it: small boys play games on it, the belongings of their families entombed beneath.

Across the street, a small shop is open during a short respite in the curfew which has paralyzed the town for months. We stop in to buy some art supplies for the children.

A group of men are watching TV. They beckon us over. We see bloody bodies being carried out on stretchers from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where a bomb has exploded in the cafeteria, killing seven people.

The bodies on the TV could be my sons, my daughters, the kids I went to Hebrew School with. I stand in a silent anguish, my back to the rubble where in April Palestinian parents were pulling the blackened corpses of their children out of the ruins.

I watch another stretcher carried out, and I can so easily imagine the shock and grief of that student's mother and father and friends. It's easy for me to identify with them, because they are my people. I know how I would feel if my partner or brother or stepdaughters were among those bodies, and nothing can justify inflicting such pain.

But I'm aware that I am looking at the scene from a different background than before I came to the camp. I'm standing with my back to the ruins of 450 homes. I've spoken with the survivors who were pulling body parts out of the rubble for days. I've talked to the ambulance drivers who were kept out while patients bled to death. Every day since I've been here, I've seen the tanks roll into Jenin, shooting into the marketplace to announce curfew. I've seen the frustration in the eyes of children who have seen their older brothers shot, their fathers arrested, and who never know when the occupying army will allow them out to play.

I'm viewing the corpses of the innocent against the background of a mountain of rubble where the crushed homes and belongings and unburied bones of the inhabitants still lie, in a town where gunshots and explosions are the normal sounds of morning, and where the targeting of the innocent is the overriding condition of life.

The men around the TV are not celebrating. They do not look happy. They look shocked and angry and infinitely weary.

"This is Sharon's doing," one says to us. "Sharon did this."

And I understand what they mean. I cannot absolve the bombers from responsibility for their acts. Some human hand set the bomb, some brain and will chose to do so, perhaps some other mind conceived of the plan. They are beyond a doubt responsible.

But those who hold the power to create the context in which others act hold a larger responsibility from which they also cannot be absolved. The policies of Sharon, the relentless, airless despair generated by this occupation, the daily injustices and humiliations all create the context for the deaths at the Hebrew University. And unless we are willing to see that larger context, unless we are outraged also at the deaths of Palestinian children and at the constraining of their lives and hopes, we too participate in the targeting of the innocent.

But the men around the TV are speaking of a more clear, direct responsibility.

Ten days before the bombing, major Palestinian militant groups, including Fatah, Arafat's organization, and Tanzim, its armed wing, with the support of ultra-militant Hamas, were about to issue a statement ending suicide attacks. It read, in part, as follows:

"It is in the name of that future, and in the name of all of those who have lost their lives, that we make this declaration: we will do everything in our power to end attacks on Israeli civilians, on innocent men, women and children, in both Israel and in the occupied lands of the West Bank and Gaza. We make this declaration without seeking or demanding any prior conditions.

"Why now?"

"The bombings of the last few months have transformed your society. Those bombings horrified and angered your people, and sent your nation into despair. It did that to us. It sparked a rethinking of who we are as a people. It marked a shift in our perceptions -- not of you, but of ourselves.

"For a time we were able to put this horror out of our minds. We were -- and we are -- the oppressed, the dispossessed and the forgotten. Our eyes look out to see what you are doing to us in our towns and villages every day, but the same eyes look at the hardened hearts of our children. It may take a generation for us to teach our children a new way, to soothe their bitterness, to erase their hatred, to teach them that there is hope for the future. But we must begin. It is for them, for their future, that we have made this historic decision: we are against targeting the innocent."

The statement was printed in the London Times on Wednesday, July 31, 2002, under a story about why it was never issued.

Just before the Palestinian factions could proclaim their ceasefire, Sharon's forces dropped a bomb from an F16 on a house in Gaza, the most densely populated area on Earth, in order to kill Saleh Shehadeh, a leader of Hamas. The bomb did get Shehadeh (who may well have been on his way out anyway had the cease fire initiative gone through), and his deputy, but it also killed thirteen other people, including nine children.

And it killed the initiative to end the bombings of civilians.

A certain amount of public outrage greeted the Gaza bombing. Politicians made statements about it. Editorials were printed in newspapers. On my first night in Israel, our group joined a peace demonstration called by Gush Shalom at the Ministry of Defense in Tel Aviv. About 200 people turned out to hold signs and chant.

The response felt inadequate. Bush did not get on TV and cry over the Gaza corpses, or label the Israeli Defense Forces "terrorists." No one questioned the sanity or the motivations of the pilot of that plane, who must have known he was participating in the killing of innocents. No one proposed impounding the homes and assets of those who funded the attack, paid for the plane, bought the bombs: the taxpayers of the United States.

Acknowledging that context does not diminish my anguish at the bodies in the Hebrew University cafeteria. I will not weigh the pain of a Palestinian mother against the pain of an Israeli mother and say that one justifies another or that one is greater or more valid. Every such loss is an infinite well of grief.

But I know that after the bomb from the F16, the bomb in the cafeteria was as predictable as fruit loss after a blight. It is still deplorable, another round in a hopeless and fruitless cycle of revenge. But it was no surprise to anyone, least of all to Sharon and his supporters.

If Sharon's goal were to assure that a teenager in Tel Aviv can go out to a disco without being blown up, the means were and are within his reach. A true policy of security would resume a political process, get out of the West Bank and Gaza, and nurture the forces within the Palestinian communities that produced the statement quoted above.

But the policies Sharon pursues are not those of security and reconciliation: they are policies of expansion and annexation. To annex the land, the Palestinians must be either subjugated utterly, driven out, or killed.

Those policies lead as surely to the bodies in the cafeteria as they do to the mountain of rubble that once was the homes of Jenin.

It is time we stopped funding, supporting, and condoning these policies.

It is time for the targeting of innocents to end.

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