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The Politics of Non-Translation: On Israeli Translations of *Intifada*, *Shahid*, *Hudna* and Islamic Movements

I REMEMBER RUBBING MY EYES with amazement. It was about ten years ago, while I was reading a book by renowned Israeli sociologist, Baruch Kimmerling. He mentioned “the popular uprising of the Palestinians in 1987”, using the Hebrew word *hitkomemut* for “uprising”. This word has straightforward positive associations in Hebrew as being an act of resistance against occupying force. “How come I have never heard of this historical event?” I pondered. “Did it happen before or after the outbreak of the Palestinian *intifada*?” (the word used in Arabic and Hebrew to depict the Palestinian riots which began in December 1987 in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank). It took me several more pages before I understood what Kimmerling was referring to. “In 2000,” he wrote, “clashes took place between Palestinians and Israeli police forces next to Al-Aqsa Mosque... and signalled the beginning of the Palestinian armed uprising.”

On the one hand I was relieved to learn that I had not missed any significant political events that had taken place in Israel/Palestine: when using “uprising” Kimmerling was referring to the two *intifadas* that broke out in 1987 and then in 2000 (which was known as *Intifadat Al-Aqsa*). On the other hand, it was then that I learned how little I knew about these events. In most Hebrew texts, the word *intifada*, which is the Arabic word used to depict these two uprisings, is not translated, and as an unexplained expression it maintains rather intimidating, demonic and violent connotations. For me, *intifada* was equivalent to rioters, terrorism, Molotov cocktails, stone throwing, burning tires, blood and clashes. I was amazed to see how a word could change the lens through which I viewed political events; even more so when I hurried to the nearest Arabic-Hebrew dictionary and found that Arabic *intifada* literally translates into Hebrew *hitkomemut*.

It is not a coincidence that, in addition to Israeli scholars, the Israeli media also chooses to keep *intifada* un-translated. By doing so, two goals are achieved: ‘loyalty’ to the word’s meaning is seen to be kept due to the use of this ‘authentic’ version, and simultaneously the word’s genuine meaning is emptied due to the lack of appropriate translation. That is to say, the word’s meaning is being re-filled with Israeli-Jewish political content, context and understanding, which is so ‘natural’ and obvious that it need not even be explained. This is how *intifada*, which is basically a responsive and defensive concept, came to be—at least in the Israeli-Jewish context—an offensive and violent notion, as distant as possible from its initial reactive nature, and is detached from the ongoing Israeli occupation.

This results in a rather surrealistic Hebrew use of the word. Since *intifada* appeared to have a negative connotation, disconnected from the context of oppression and resistance against it, it was made available to be used in internal Israeli contexts as criticism of the ‘irrational’ and ‘violent’ behaviour of different groups against the legitimacy of the establishment. When the *Haredi* (Ultra-Orthodox) Jewish community in Jerusalem demonstrated against the Gay Pride Parade, vandalising street signs and burning rubbish bins, the Israeli media depicted them as fanatic extremists, who will bring about a *Haredi Intifada*. When the Israeli army decided to evacuate a house of Jewish settlers in the Palestinian city of Hebron, the settlers started attacking Palestinians in the city. The Israeli media then brought forward the ‘illegitimate’ nature of their reaction and reported on “riots of Jewish settlers against Palestinians” warning of the dangers of a “Jewish settlers’ *intifada* in Hebron”. When the lecture of the Israeli Ambassador to the US was stopped repeatedly by pro-Palestinian demonstrators, Israeli media titled it as a violent act of “Academic *Intifada*”.

The term *intifada* has become so prevalent in Israeli-Hebrew discourse that all connotations of the Palestinian struggle for independence—or their desire to shake off Israeli checkpoints and control over their lives—are now secondary. Muhammad Barakeh, a Palestinian member of the Israeli parliament, said in 2000 that “We appreciate and respect

the *intifada* and believe that this is the right response [to the Israeli occupation].” Barakeh meant that the Palestinians living in the West Bank should support the mass uprising against Israeli occupation, and the resistance to its continuation. Israeli authorities understood it differently. The Attorney General said that the use of the term *intifada* demands an “investigation into Barakeh’s violation of Israeli law against the incitement to terrorism”.

THE CASE OF THE *shahid* is no different. This word, meaning ‘witness’ in Arabic, is used by Muslims to depict ‘martyrs’. In the Palestinian political context it mostly refers to those who died as a result of or as a response to the Israeli occupation. The word *shahid* is cognate with the term *shahada*, which is the Muslim declaration of belief in the oneness of God and in the prophet Muhammad. According to the tradition, Muslim believers who die in the name of a moral cause (one political example might be the Palestinian struggle for independence) are reported to say the *shahada* before they die, and are believed to become martyrs living in paradise with God.

Israeli Orientalists and media perceive this concept of *shahid* or *shahada* as alien to Israeli/Jewish society, and definitely inhuman. The idea of valuing one’s death over one’s life is seen as a kind of backward Islamic concept only confirming what ‘we’ already ‘know’ about Islam, Muslims and Palestinians. Prof. Yoav Gelber from Haifa University summarised this in his book, *History, Memory, Propaganda: The Historical Discipline in Israel and in the World* (published in 2007, in Hebrew): “there are cultural differences between the Christian culture of confession, and the Jewish self-accusation culture, and the ‘everyone should be blamed but me’ Palestinian-Arab culture... [There are differences] between a culture which places the sacredness of life in the centre [Judaism] and a culture that encourages suicides and *shahids* [Islam]...” (my translation).

A publication of the Israeli General Security System (*Shabak*) highlights that in Palestinian summer camps, the children are exposed to

photos of *shabids* that are placed in their rooms. The Israeli Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center dedicate part of its report to the “culture of praising *shabids* among Palestinians” and give the following as an example: “Palestinian children are being taught that a good way to celebrate the Palestinian Day of Independence is by visiting families of *shabids*.” The fact that Palestinians do not celebrate a Day of Independence—since they are still occupied and this is what they are fighting for—is not the most disturbing misconception of this report. More important is that the so-called ‘alien’ culture of praising dead fighters and placing them in the centre of school life, religious belief or historical education, is definitely not different to another social group living not far away: Israeli-Jewish society.

Firstly, Judaism definitely has a comparable concept to *shabid* and it is called *Kiddush ha-Shem* (‘Sanctification of the name of God’). This concept, which is much closer to the Islamic *shabid* than the Christian ‘martyr’, praises the deaths of those who died while sacrificing their lives for the sake of their Jewish community or Jewish religion. When this happens, the person who is going to die needs to say the *Shema Yisrael* prayer, which is the Jewish declaration of belief in the oneness of God. In the Torah, two letters of the *Shema Yisrael* are emboldened—’Ayin and Dalet—which together makes the word *’ed*, meaning, in Hebrew, a witness.

Secondly, there is a constant disregard of the parallel social repercussions that this concept has in Israeli society, and the similarity between these Jewish and Muslim concepts is not even debated within the Israeli-Jewish community. The fact that Israeli society dedicates gardens, lecture rooms, parks, nature reserves, schools etc. to Israeli-Jewish soldiers who died is deemed acceptable, and is not seen as alien. Also the fact that Israeli children, in their Day of Independence, remember the fallen soldiers and visit their families seems perfectly natural. The Masada Site is merely one example of that. This site, which has become a place of education for Israeli schoolchildren and soldiers, was selected due to its ‘heroic’ historical/Jewish importance: it was there, in 73 AD, that a Jewish mass suicide of men, women and children took place, justified by *Kiddush ha-Shem*, in order not to surrender to the Romans.

The Israeli-Jewish foreignization of the term *shahid*, by keeping it in Arabic, and not linking and connecting it to concepts pervasive within Jewish belief and Israeli society, assists with the general demonization of Palestinian people and their culture. By keeping the term *shahid* disconnected from Palestinian resistance, and while maintaining the praising of *shahids* as detached from Palestinian struggle or life under continuous oppression, the Israeli discourse enables its own preservation as the antithesis of the Palestinian one. If this did not happen, Israeli-Jewish children might wake up from a nightmare one night, covered with cold sweat, realising that *Shimshon ha-Gibor* (Samson) was the first *shahid* in the history of mankind.

Another method of dealing with Arabic/Islamic concepts within the Israeli discourse is relegating them to a one-dimensional and unchanging religious context. Hence, the *shahid* is always a person who dies while killing others, allegedly unlike the Jewish concept, according to which a person can also die over *Kiddush ha-Shem* when defending others, or when preferring to die rather than converting to another religion. The idea that *shahid* can be a person who died while seeking knowledge, or a mother who dies during childbirth, are not part of the Israeli discussion, nor—as Prof. Sasson Somekh put it—that there is also ‘*A Shahid of Love*’.

THE SAME APPLIES in the case of the term *hudna*. When explaining this term in Israel, the emphasis is that it is a ‘ceasefire’ but not a real one. Rather, it is a ‘ceasefire’ but a temporary one, following which battles will be renewed in one stage or another by the ‘vicious’, ‘unreliable’, Palestinian ‘other’. This is the notion spread in Israel when a Palestinian party, such as Hamas, proposes a *hudna*—a cessation of fire from both sides. According to Prof. Jacob Lassner and Ilan Troen from Ben Gurion University, the *hudna* is an arrangement that may last for years “but the battle *must* be resumed when the calculus of power favours the faithful”.

This description has its roots in the Islamic precedent of *hudna*, which was the basis of the Hudaibiyya agreement in 628 AD, signed by the Prophet Muhammad and tribe of Quraysh. This agreement was made redundant in 630 when the Prophet Muhammad and his followers conquered Mecca. However, this is only one narrative related to *hudna*, and 1382 years of developments—including interpretations, re-interpretations, new historical case studies, and the emergence of different approaches—separate it from now. The historical evidence indicates that Prophet Muhammad did not plan to violate the conditions of the *hudna* when signing them. But this is not even the debate. Since 628 AD the *hudna* has served in many situations as a bridge toward *Sulh* (reconciliation agreement) as a first stage of permanent peace solutions and as a basis of peace treaties, such as the 1860 Moroccan-Spanish agreement following the war in Tatuán. Israelis need not even explore the tradition in great depth to understand that *hudna* was traditionally a straightforward, nonviolent concept. In 1979, the peace treaty signed between Israel and Egypt, the first ever recognition of Israel by an Arab state, was achieved after Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat received a religious authorisation justifying the peaceful agreement in the precedent of the *hudna*.

The idea that Jewish religious concepts evolve and change with time, and have been interpreted and re-interpreted, is taken to be natural and obvious within Israeli-Jewish discourse. However, the Islamic texts, and the related concepts, are perceived as frozen in time, kept unchanged through the generations, incapable of any development whatsoever.

One can argue that Israel is not really ready to end its occupation or to acknowledge the Palestinian *nakba* (the establishment of Israel through the forced expulsion of more than 700,000 Palestinians during the 1948 War) and therefore the expected ‘collapse’ of the ceasefire agreement is—in a very distorted way—Israeli wishful thinking. So *hudna* continues to be explained as an unreliable, deceitful agreement, incapable of longevity. When the elected Hamas Prime Minister Isma’il Haniyyeh tried to reach a *hudna* agreement with Israel in 2007, President Shimon Peres said that “this is a pathetic attempt aiming [not at a ceasefire] but

at diverting the debate from the crimes committed by Hamas". "*Hudna* is just a deceit", wrote the military correspondent of Ha'aretz newspaper. In May 2008 Ehud Barak rejected a proposal for a *hudna* made by Hamas, justifying his decision on the same grounds.

The Israeli refusal to translate *hudna* as 'ceasefire', and the insistence on keeping it in Arabic—explained as some kind of an Islamic archaic and deceitful version of 'ceasefire'—corresponds with the general view of Israeli 'experts' toward Palestinians. The Israeli grip on explanations such as, "Palestinians just try to steal time through the *hudna*", or "the *hudna* is a mere deception", stems from the disbelief that Palestinians can genuinely speak the truth, or desire a peaceful life. Tzvi Yehezkel, perhaps the most popular commentator on Arab Affairs in Israeli television, explains this phenomenon cogently. According to him, "There is a proverb in Arabic which says: 'do you want the truth or its brother'... and the Arabs usually prefer its brother." The fact that this kind of view is expressed by an 'expert' on Arabic language and Middle Eastern Affairs, or in other cases even by 'experts' in academia, not only allows for wide dissemination of these ideas, but arguably also reflects an Israeli general attitude towards its ultimate 'other': the Arab. The emphasis put on the 'Arab mind'—as a different, deceitful, and frozen concept, which some hoped would disappear following Edward Said's *Orientalism*—seems to play as strong a role within Israeli society today as ever.

DEMONISING OR NEGATIVE values are also attached to concepts when non-translating them is not the chosen technique. Sometimes, the translation itself can help achieve exactly the same aims. Take, for example, the Islamic movement which has operated in Israel since the 1970s, first headed by Sheikh 'Abdalla Nimr Darwish. In its early days it was called in Hebrew *ha-Tnua'a ha-Islamit* (lit. 'The Islamic Movement'). In 1996, in light of the upcoming elections for the Israeli parliament, a division took place within the movement's leadership regarding the question of participation in the elections. The movement then split into two: those who supported participation in the elections

followed Sheikh Ibrahim Sarsour, and those who opposed it—and represented a more radical stand—followed Sheikh Ra'ed Salah. Since then, a split has also taken place between the Arabic and the Hebrew terminology. Perhaps due to increased tensions within Israel between Palestinians and Israeli-Jews, or the general political deterioration in those years (just before the Palestinian uprising of 2000) the Israeli media did not follow the Palestinian and Arabic terminology as “the Islamic movement headed by Sheikh Sarsour” and “the Islamic movement headed by Sheikh Salah”, and instead called them “The Northern Faction” and “The Southern Faction”.

The word ‘faction’ in Hebrew is translated as *peleg* and has a mostly political connotation of a faction in war or conflict. It was not chosen arbitrarily. The fact that only 60 kilometres separate the office of the “The Northern Faction” (in Umm Al-Fahm) and that of “The Southern Faction” (in Kufr Qassim) indicate that this terminology was chosen in order to create a threatening ‘north vs. south’ division, and did not stem from a genuine division between two geographic regions, which is altogether ridiculous in such a small country.

Consider the following headlines, which were published in Israeli newspapers: “Minister of Internal Security Blamed the Islamic Movement’s *Northern Faction* for the Clashes in the Old City in Jerusalem”; “Al-Aqsa Institution, which is *Affiliated with the Northern Faction* of the Islamic Movement Accused Israel for Illegal Archaeological Works”; “The Leader of the *Northern Faction* was Arrested”; and “Israeli Court Rejected the Appeal of the *Southern Faction*”. This terminology is embedded with intimidating components for their Israeli readers, which on the one hand increases the sales of newspapers and on the other eases the demonization of a political ‘Other’.

Israeli understanding of Palestinian politics is being forged through the mediation of Israeli ‘experts’ who recruit words and terminology to their side. The mission of these ‘experts’ is not really difficult: Israel

has experienced conflicts with Arab states and Arab military movements from its very beginning; Israeli-Jews do not read Arabic and by and large alienate the language, its sounds, its speakers and their culture. By using words in Arabic, the field of expertise not only uses the already-hostile Zionist discourse towards Arabic language and sounds, but brings non-experts to the turf of the experts. Then the loading of Arabic words with explanations and contexts which are intimidating or that can serve as a future justification for the renewal of battles, is an easy task.

The same mission can be accomplished by translating a certain expression in a distorted military- or negatively-oriented way. The reader, or the receiver, does not have alternative sources of information, certainly not the Arabic press or foreign academic resources, as these, too, are not considered as reliable and objective as the Israeli-Jewish sources. Through this process the writer writes what the reader is willing and capable to read, and the expert interprets and comments within the already embedded and limited political understanding of the listener and of the Israeli-Jewish institution which produces this knowledge. Peter Berger wrote once about the “danger of meaninglessness”. Perhaps this concept can be borrowed and help us understand—even partially—the dominance of a one-dimensional, one-sided, analysis that has prevailed in the Israeli field of Middle Eastern Studies and ‘expertise’ since its very beginning.

One cannot say what would have happened if Israelis were to consume information from experts and commentators who were not discursively part of the establishment, or psychologically entrenched in the ‘Other-Arab’ paradigm. We should ask ourselves how we react to the following statements: “the culture of *shabids* is an inherent part of the Islamic belief”, “Palestinians threaten with another *intifada*”, “The *Northern Faction* will demonstrate in Jerusalem”, and “Hamas’s pathetic proposal for a temporary unreliable *hudna*”. Or what do we make of these more accurate equivalents: “the Palestinians’ concept of Jewish *Kiddush ha-Shem* is part of the Islamic belief”, “the Palestinian people will continue their *uprising* in light of the continuous occupation”, “the Israeli

Islamic movement will demonstrate in Jerusalem” and “ Hamas suggests to Israel a genuine promising *ceasefire*”.

The Israeli hatred of the Palestinian ‘Other’, to its political affiliations, military decisions, and actual ‘Otherness’, is to a certain degree a linguistic invention. It has recruited to the battlefield morphological structures, concepts of translation and even the humble soldiers of transliteration. Language has been revealed by Israelis to be a meaningful reinforcement in its battles against the Palestinians. One can argue that it is a fifth column much more than anything else.

Author Info

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