

What makes a massacre?

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by Robert Jensen

What is the definition of a “real” massacre?

Imagine that troops from a country that is illegally occupying another land move into an occupied town, where there are some resistance fighters among the civilian population. The occupying power uses helicopter gunships, tanks, missiles, and troops in its attack. Some prisoners taken by the occupying country’s troops are executed in the streets while handcuffed. The troops use civilians as human shields when entering buildings. Bulldozers destroy homes, sometimes burying people still in them. And the occupying country’s troops block ambulances and medical personnel from entering the town to care for the wounded, leaving civilians to die in the streets.

Would such an attack be a massacre if 63 people died, about half of them civilians? Or would it be something less, perhaps just a war crime? How many deaths does it take to turn a garden-variety atrocity into a massacre?

Perhaps the more important question is: How morally bankrupt is a world in which such arguments about whether such an attack is really a massacre overshadow the cries of the victims, the demands of justice, and the need for an international response?

The description above is of the Israeli assault on the Palestinian town of Jenin in April 2002, part of an ongoing Israeli offensive in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Israeli forces won the battle, but just as important was Israel’s public-relations victory for control of what the assault meant.

Early reports out of Jenin, including some from Israelis, speculated about a Palestinian death toll in the hundreds. The term “massacre” was used by observers, journalists, and Palestinians to describe the carnage, but after the attack it became clear that “only” 50 or 60 Palestinians had been killed. The Israeli spin machine then launched a campaign that emphasized not the criminal behavior of its military and the massive destruction to the town, but the early overestimates of casualties: Since the death toll was lower, it couldn’t have been a massacre. And because Israel also successfully blocked a United Nations team from conducting an inquiry, that’s how the story was played in the U.S. news media.

Subsequent investigation by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International -- both of which concluded the Israeli military committed war crimes -- have added to the understanding of the attack on Jenin. Now a new book -- “Searching Jenin,” published by Cune Press in Seattle -- has supplied important eyewitness testimony of what happened in those two weeks in April. Under the direction of editor Ramzy Baroud, a Palestinian-American, teams of journalists interviewed Jenin residents to construct a detailed picture of the assault as it was experienced by the civilian population.

War is, of course, never pretty, and some aspects of these stories will be familiar to anyone who has confronted the realities of modern warfare. It is never easy to read about such horrors, especially when the victims include the weakest among us -- the sick, children, and the elderly. But along with those heart-wrenching stories, equally

disturbing are the accounts of what the occupation has done to Israeli soldiers. Several witnesses talked of how the troops defecated and urinated in homes and mosques to express their contempt for the Palestinians. Racist anti-Arab slogans were written on the walls of people's homes. In one incident, reported by a man who works as a clerk in the Palestinian Ministry of Youth and Sports, Israeli forces broke into a home and one of the soldiers put the barrel of his gun to a baby's head and asked, "Should I kill him?" A woman screamed at the man to let go of the child. Another soldier answered, "You are a camp of animals. You are not human beings."

This is the consequence of occupation, of oppression. The occupied live with inadequate resources and suffer most of the violence. But there is a cost to the occupier as well, not just when suicide bombers are successful, but also in the loss of their own humanity. One wins land at the cost of the soul.

This is an issue not simply for Israel and its soldiers, but for U.S. citizens as well. Those of us paying taxes in the United States are implicated in the occupation and the attack on Jenin because of the \$3 billion a year in U.S. aid that flows to Israel, helping them pay for the occupation. U.S. political and diplomatic support makes it possible for Israel to resist the international consensus for a peaceful settlement of the conflict. When we in the United States do not act to end that aid and support, and therefore allow the occupation to continue, we share in that loss of humanity. Morally, we are responsible for those soldiers' actions.

How long can we ignore that? Perhaps more important, how long can the people of Jenin and Palestine survive while we ignore it?

For more information about organizing efforts in the United States, go to <http://endtheoccupation.org>.

For information on "Searching Jenin," go to

<http://www.cunepress.com/>

<http://www.palestinebooks.com/>

<http://www.palestinechronicle.com/>

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