Why do people support the Palestinians?

Mark Humphrys, 25 Sept 2016, for the Sunday Times.

Why do people support the Palestinians? It's a simple question, but a real mystery. If, as seems clear to me, every supporter of the world's democracies and opponent of non-democracies should broadly support Israel - and be broadly *hostile* to the Palestinians - why does the world not see it that way?

I recently met with an Israeli diplomat posted to Ireland who asked this question. Israelis encounter varying levels of hostility in Europe, and often wonder why so many Europeans take the Palestinian side. Many wonder could it be anti-semitism. Could parts of Irish Catholicism be hostile to Jews, for example? But living here in Ireland, it is obvious that other, more modern reasons are at play.

The Palestinian cause is, on the face of it, deeply unattractive. They are fighting against a liberal democracy in order to set up not a new democracy but rather an oppressive religious state (Hamas) or a thuggish autocracy (Fatah). In whatever they set up, there will be no elections and no civil liberties. So what is it about their cause that makes people support them?

The Palestinians hit all the right buttons

It seems they hit all the right buttons:

1. They are (allegedly) the "oppressed" fighting against "oppressors". Yet when you look at their complaints, almost every last one is a consequence of the violence they direct at Israel. If they stopped the violence, Palestinians could have a very nice life.
2. They are (allegedly) the "poor" fighting the "rich". The fact that it is their own fault they are poor (look at what the intifada did to their GDP) and the Israelis *deserve* their wealth because they work hard to create it, is neither here nor there.
3. They are (allegedly) "non-whites" fighting "whites". Many Westerners care primarily about crimes by "whites" or "people like us", and care little about crimes by "non-whites". Whether such a bias makes sense or not, to think of this conflict as "non-whites" versus "whites" is actually nonsense. Israelis comes from all over the world, including all over the Middle East (from which they were expelled). But for many Westerners, this is not about reality. All Israelis are honorary "whites".

4. They are fighting against Jews - always a popular target. This is probably the main reason worldwide.
5. They are Muslim, giving them a sympathetic constituency of 1 billion. Muslims tend to sympathise with Muslims engaged in conflict with non-Muslims worldwide. Christians aren't like this. Christians worldwide are on their own, and get little support from western Christians. If the Palestinians were Christian, nobody would support them. And if they were *fundamentalist* Christian, the Western left would *despise* them.
6. They are fighting a democracy. A wealthy democracy is a nice safe place for journalists to report from. In non-democracies, facilities are primitive and unpleasant, and journalists live in fear of arrest or death. Hence, lots of journalists in Israel. Hardly any journalists in the Sudan or North Korea.
7. They are violent and barbaric, with deliberate attacks against the most defenceless civilians. If the Palestinians engaged in peaceful protest, few would pay them much attention. But when they engage in sadistic attacks against civilians, the world pays attention. The sane part of the word is revolted. But less sensible people have a different reaction. They believe (despite history's total lack of evidence for this) that if someone is willing to carry out such acts they must have a good reason. And so, due to the strange nature of humans, Palestinian barbarism gets them *more* support, not less.
8. Violence is exciting. Many Westerners are excited by "revolutionary" violence against the West. These terror fans are everywhere on social media. If the Palestinians were peaceful, they would be of no interest to them.
9. Lack of compromise is exciting. If the Palestinians decided to give up on the "struggle" and pursue money, jobs, family and shopping, I would be delighted for them. Israel would pump money into their economy, their GDP would triple and their life would be much better. But their Western fans, to whom they serve a psychological need, would be horrified. They would feel betrayed by the Palestinians and would go elsewhere in the world to seek other uncompromising opponents of the West.

Hating Israel is a safe way of hating the West

Many leftish Westerners desire a safe way of hating the West, a safe way of declaring their moral superiority to the culture of plenty they grew up in. Hating the entire West is too hardcore, but hating a small part of the West works. It is Israel's bad luck that it fits the bill. Hating Israel is a safe way of hating the West, a way of signalling your virtue without risk.

So the Israeli diplomat and other Israelis should not take Irish hostility personally. It's not really about the conflict. It's not about them. It's about us.

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