

Ahed Tamimi - A sixteen year old girl is on trial in a military court, for slapping an occupying soldier

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As everyone knows, Ahed Tamimi is a teenage girl who slapped an Israeli soldier. As is less well known, Tamimi is on trial in a military court, with a 99.7% conviction rate (a totalitarian level of conviction, you might say). The fifteen charges against her include aggravated assault of a soldier, threatening a soldier, preventing soldiers from carrying out their duties, incitement, disturbing the public peace and stone throwing.

Let me repeat that: a sixteen year old girl is on trial in a military court, for slapping an occupying soldier. I know that Tamimi is not some sort of naive little girl. She is an experienced anti-occupation activist. This is what the hateful Israeli propaganda videos refer to when they call her 'Shirley Temper' and belittle her protests as troublemaking.

Nonetheless, a sixteen year old girl is on trial in a military court, for slapping a heavily armed soldier. A protest more symbolically freighted than actually seriously inconveniencing the occupiers. A protest which, being armed only with moral force (which is not, therefore, to say completely unarmed) they could easily have chosen to ignore. And it seems that, in Israel, this is not controversial. Indeed, the slap heard around the world has resulted in a very anguished, traumatised conversation which veers between ritual expressions of pride in the military's heroism, and aghast lamentations about the injury to national pride.

The Likudnik and former Brigadier-General of the IDF, Miri Regev mourned: "When I watched that, I felt humiliated, I felt crushed" [1]. Ben Ehrenreich reports Israeli journalists using "words like "castrated" and "impotent" to describe how they felt [2] when they looked at that soldier with his helmet and his body armor and his gun and at the kid in the pink T-shirt and blue windbreaker who put him to shame. For all their strength, power, wealth, and arrogance, she had put them all to shame." On the other side of the debate, Israeli vigour and phallic power was actually proved by the event, and by the calm, quiet heroism of the troops. Avi Buskila, who chairs the Amos Oz-founded Peace Now organisation, asserted that "The soldiers acted heroically, exactly how is expected from them." [3] Whether Likudnik or peacenik, the agreed premise is that these tricky, sly Palestinians were out to provoke, bait and humiliate their brave, noble boys.

The respected journalist, Ben Caspit, who writes for the liberal, peace-oriented end of the press, wrote in *Maariv* of how the humiliation could be avenged [4]:

“There is no stomach which does not turn when witnessing this clip ... I, for example, if I were to encounter that situation, I would have long ago been in detention until end of procedures ... in the case of the girls, we should exact a price at some other opportunity, in the dark, without witnesses and cameras”.

As Jonathan Ofir points out [5], those that demand the restoration of Israeli pride with firm retaliatory violence miss the point that it was in fact Tamimi’s slap that was retaliatory. This is not a nuanced point about the slow, structural violence of occupation: literally, Ofir says, the soldier struck first. This is, if true, even occluded in most anglophone reporting. (Although, parenthetically, I must say that the tone of reporting of Palestine has changed markedly in recent years. That *Newsweek* is printing articles like this [6], with videos describing the actual genesis of Israel, and the Palestinian Nakba, is astounding — it would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.)

Lisa Goldman reports that this sort of discussion arises because the media coverage is overwhelmingly given over, including in the liberal wing of the media, to the uncritical reproduction of military propaganda — to wit, the specious argument argument that Israeli troops were only there to prevent rock throwing by troublemaking, duplicitous natives. The Tamimis have been protesting being deprived of land and their access to water by a nearby colony for a long time, Goldman reports, and nary a rock has been lobbed in all that time.

This whole discussion is, of course, racist. Even the necessary and helpful interventions of Ofir and Goldman, for example, are forced to work with an insidious, barbaric premise. The fact that we must even engage with the sort of narrative which starts by slinging mud at the oppressed and the colonised, shows how much the Palestinians have already been dehumanised. What: the coloniser can have his arsenals, but the colonised can’t have a rock?

However, it’s also batshit crazy. The fact that a militarily powerful, well-supported state which is systematically overwhelming its opposition would react in such a fragile, delicate way to a largely symbolic protest event, is deranged.

Gil Gertel argues that what underlies this is sense of humiliation is that Tamimi subverted Zionist mythology [7]: who is really David, and who Goliath, in this situation? I can see the force of that explanation, although one could add that in practice it was the State of Israel which subverted that mythology. There is palpable guilt here. But, to me, it evokes nothing so powerfully as the precarious hierarchies of the Jim Crow states [8], their extremely delicate nature, their sensitivity to any affront to authority and propriety, their willingness to explode in violent outbursts in the event that a black person might ‘sass’ a white man, and their constant, countersubversive alert over troublemakers. As though the whole system is so fragile that one sleight too far, tolerated, could bring the whole thing crashing down.

Tamimi is a hero, as her supporters on social media say. Her father is right to be proud of her [9]. But she is also, to underline again, a sixteen year old girl, who is being tried by a military court and faces imprisonment. And if you go by the media, almost the entire nation of Israel thinks that she has victimised them.

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P.S.

* Jan 2 at 7:47pm: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/16184859>

Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/palestinian-girl-ahed-tamimi-praised-hero-after-confronting-soldiers-n831571>
- [2] ESSF (article 42830), [Ahed Tamimi Has Become the Symbol of a New Generation of Palestinian Resistance](#).
- [3] <https://forward.com/opinion/israel/390591/video-of-a-palestinian-girl-hitting-soldiers-shows-the-idfs-moral-fiber/>
- [4] <http://mondoweiss.net/2017/12/should-israeli-journalist/>
- [5] <http://mondoweiss.net/2017/12/tamimi-slapped-talking/>
- [6] <https://www.newsweek.co.uk/i-watched-ahed-tamimi-grow-i-know-why-she-attacked-israeli-soldiers-534951>
- [7] <https://972mag.com/ahed-tamimi-flips-zionist-mythology-on-its-head/131783/>
- [8] <http://www.leninology.co.uk/2012/03/trayvon-martin-and-history-of-lynching.html>
- [9] <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.831873>