

# Steadfast before Goliath

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When I am asked about Palestinian identity, one idea keeps coming to mind. I was told it would be translated into English as ‘steadfastness’. I looked up what a steadfast person would be like and the dictionary says, ‘One marked by firm determination or resolution – not shakeable – of firm convictions and strong resolve. A man of unbendable perseverance and unwavering loyalty’.

That’s pretty close to what I had in mind, but somewhat incomplete – it is hard to capture an entire people in a word. Steadfastness refers to our Palestinian character of never giving in. It refers to our standing up to overwhelming odds time and again, without a friend in our corner. It is about our being beaten and abused in every way known to man, only to get back up with our heads held high.

This is impressive, but if it is understood only in this way steadfastness could easily be exchanged for a different, less appealing word: stubbornness. In itself, refusing to give up is not an admirable quality. After all, the rather unsavoury and racist group of settlers in Hebron could also be described as steadfast. They too display ‘unwavering loyalty’ and ‘firm convictions’, and they too seemingly never give in.

What makes our steadfastness admired around the world is not only our perseverance but the justice of our cause, which is freedom, democracy and plurality. It is important to remember this broader definition of our character and our steadfastness. It is even more important for us to more loudly trumpet this, our true identity, throughout the world.

The reason is simple: Israel has dedicated

an enormous amount of resources to perverting our identity and the character of our struggle. It has gained a significant degree of influence over the media, especially in the West, and has used this strength to transform and manipulate reality to its own ends. Thus, despite our being slaughtered in the streets of Gaza, we are told that we are not only to blame but that the siege we are enduring is unworthy of international intervention.

Despite having thousands of our civilian brothers, sons, fathers, sisters, mothers and daughters in Israeli prisons routinely subjected to torture, we are told to immediately release a single captured Israeli soldier – or face another wave of high-tech brutality.

Despite the fact that we have international and human rights law on our side, it is said that we are ‘stubborn’ because of our refusal to surrender the remainder of our historic birthright to Israeli occupation. We Palestinians are depicted in much of the media as steadfast only in our savagery, irrationality and propensity for violence.

From the 1920s onward, Palestinian resistance has been overwhelmingly non-violent. The number of peaceful, unarmed Palestinian martyrs of this conflict far outweighs those of us who have fought the enemy on its own violent terms. From boycotts to business and hunger strikes, from demonstrations to diplomacy, we Palestinians are engaged daily in non-violent struggle against the occupation of our land and the constant abuse of our dignity and security.

The international media do not focus on this, of course; instead they choose to emphasize the rare instances of Palestinian violence to such a degree that, in the eyes of the international community, they appear to be comparable to the massive crimes of our occupier. There is no better example of this than the international coverage of the slaughter of our brothers and sisters in the Gaza Strip.

The world is told, and thus believes, that a ‘war’ was being waged between two equals, rather than an asymmetric massacre being carried out by the world’s fifth-largest military-industrial complex upon one of the world’s last remaining stateless peoples.

Israel has not only killed hundreds of women, children and civilian men; it has systematically destroyed the economy and infrastructure of the tiny coastal Strip. It has employed illegal incendiary weapons against heavily populated civilian areas, and munitions that burn through our skin, straight to the bone. Israel has killed doctors, journalists and aid workers alike in its ‘war against Hamas and terror’ – and it remains brazenly unapologetic.

Our death toll has climbed well over 1,000 while the aggressor mourns

the loss of little over a dozen – most of them soldiers, and many of whom have died as a result of Israeli army ‘friendly fire’. Yet the world is still told it is watching a war unfold rather than a massacre.

The main reason so much effort is put into distorting the character of Palestinians is that if the world were to really know what is going on here, the collective emotion would shift from apathy towards our struggle to one of anger at our oppressor. Israel knows that if the world were able to see Palestine, it would have to draw conclusions and make comparisons. Americans allowed to watch the daily brutality committed against peaceful protesters would immediately connect our plight to that of the African-American civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s.

If Africans were allowed to see the conditions of occupation in the West Bank, they would be unable to disassociate this from the South African anti-apartheid movement of the 1970s and ’80s – which led to the triumph of the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela.

If the world were allowed to see what is actually taking place in Gaza right now, it would be unable to avoid comparisons with the Nazi ghettoization of Jews in the 1930s and ’40s – which culminated in systematic slaughter. But the world is not allowed to see these truths; instead, it is fed a daily dose of rhetoric taken out of context, or images from the occasional backlash of a Palestinian with nothing left to lose.

Despite the fact that our non-violence goes unnoticed by a world biased in favour of our oppressor, we continue unabated. We continue not because non-violence, resilience and the steadfast pursuit of justice is a ‘strategy’ we hope will one day turn the tide of public opinion in our favour; we continue because this is who we are. It is our integrity that guides our struggle – not the constant humiliation and provocation of our oppressor.

This integrity, the justice of our cause, and the means by which we pursue it are the gravest threat to Israel and the Zionist agenda for our land – far graver than homemade rockets or suicide bombers. Israel understands this, and thus works hard to pervert this reality in the minds of Israelis and the international community.

Their fear is evident in the means by which they suppress popular non-violence throughout the West Bank. In Ni’lin over the past six months, four non-violent youths have been turned into martyrs by the Israeli army. Countless others have sustained serious injuries, from tear-gas asphyxiation and beatings to bullets – the live kind and the rubber-coated steel sort.

Recently in Bi’lin, protesters donned the striped garb of Jews at the Warsaw Ghetto to remind Israel how its actions today are reflections of the

crimes committed against Jews by the Nazis. This statement so incensed the Israeli soldiers that they abandoned their positions and chased the protesters right into the heart of the village. A number of them were beaten – presumably for reminding Israelis of their past and injuring their contemporary sensibilities.

On a regular basis, peace activists are humiliated, blindfolded and shot in the kneecaps, sprayed with sewage and chemicals, deafened and ‘microwaved’ by newer and ever more sadistic methods of crowd control, imprisoned and tortured. They do it over and over again, usually on Fridays, but often throughout the week. They engage the military more often than any or all of the armed militias in Palestine, and they go unarmed – or at most with stones – to fight Goliath again and again.

Out of fear and in retaliation, the Israelis resort to the only weapon available to those who neither possess integrity nor follow a just cause: violence. They do so in the hope that we will respond in kind – that we will fight on their terms instead of our own. They do so in the hope that they can change what it is to be a Palestinian: steadfast in our pursuit of justice. Their efforts have failed and will continue to fail. Our character and our steadfastness are unshakable – and we will have the justice we deserve, in this life or the next.

Israel’s most recent crime against our people in the Gaza Strip is only another attempt in its quest to undermine our identity and pervert our methods. The occupier screams from his watchtowers and F-16s, ‘We only understand violence! Fight! Fight! Fight!’ They plead with us to take the bait and dehumanize them, as they have done so completely to us.

We are steadfast in our cause and in our methods. We are armed with truth, justice, signs, flags and, sometimes, stones – nothing more. We will be marching again on Friday throughout the West Bank, and again the Friday after that, and again, and again ... until we have defeated Goliath. A defeat that will finally liberate Palestinians and Israelis from the cancer of occupation and apartheid, and that will open the way for our dream, where all human beings – whether they are Palestinian or Israeli – will be treated equally, with dignity, and without prejudice.

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