

Keffiyeh as Neo-Swastika Fashion Statement



by Eric Rozenman

Did you notice the three members of Congress wearing swastikas during President Biden's State of the Union address early in March? They adorned U.S. [Reps. Rashida Tlaib \(D-Mich.\)](#), Cori Bush (D-Mo.) and Summer Lee (D-Pa.), of the Democratic Party's progressive squad, now up to eight sworn members.

They sported not the hooked cross symbol of Nazism, but rather its contemporary equivalent, the *keffiyeh*. The traditional Arab head-covering is *de rigueur* among friends of Hamas. One sees them everywhere in the West, from London streets to American college campuses, and now in the U.S. Capitol.

In nations on the winning side of World War II, the swastika as emblem of Adolf Hitler's imagined Jew-free Thousand Year Reich remains a bit *déclassé*. The *keffiyeh*, however, provides a wonderful work-around for adherents of re-ghettoized diaspora Jewry and a Jew-free Middle East.

Disclosure: I first made the comparison "Keffiyeh as Swastika" for the *Journal for the Study of Antisemitism* more than a dozen years ago. I repeated it in *Jews Make the Best Demons: "Palestine" and the Jewish Question* in 2018.

Yasser Arafat introduced Western audiences to the *keffiyeh* by wearing one during [his 1974 speech](#) to the United Nations General Assembly. He typically draped his headdress in the shape of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. By the end of the 1980s the fringed scarf in gray/black and white with a large hound's-tooth or net pattern was becoming, like Che Guevara T-shirts, a fashion statement. The implicit statement

was this: People who kill Jews were again fashionable.

The Palestine Liberation Organization leader had more Jewish blood on his hands than anyone else since the Holocaust (and even more blood of brother Arabs). Guevara had served as Fidel Castro's enthusiastic executioner in the Cuban communists' seizure of power. Like Che T-shirts, Arafat's garment signaled revolutionary hipness.

Semiotically, as they say in faculty lounges, the *keffiyeh* worked as cloth swastika with a critical advantage. When it debuted in the West, lingering anti-antisemitism of the World War II generation still made the Nazi symbol taboo among the respectable.

But anti-Zionism provided a flanking maneuver. After Israel defeated the Soviet Union's Egyptian and Syrian clients in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Moscow inspired and the PLO promoted the [libelous Zionism-is-racism resolution](#) at the United Nations' General Assembly. The year after Arafat's speech, a majority of assembly states, frightened by the anti-Israel Arab oil boycott and PLO terrorism, adopted the psych-war resolution.

Holy hatred

"Racist!" being the post-Holocaust equivalent of the medieval "Christ-killer!" indictment of the Jews, its obscene application to the only multi-ethnic, multi-religious democracy in the Middle East authorized "resistance by any means necessary" to the Jews and their state. It sanctified Arafat's *keffiyeh*.

Despite U.S.-led repeal of the "Zionism-is-racism" resolution in 1991, this reactionary dogma continued to poison education, journalism and diplomacy. PLO terrorism became the gateway drug for al-Qaeda, ISIS and Hamas terrorism, and anti-Zionism progressively renormalized antisemitism.

So, today it is barely newsworthy when *keffiyeh* wearers from the Gaza Strip and Iran through European capitals to marchers on Pennsylvania Avenue near the White House in Washington, D.C. scream contemporary blood libels. They shout “racist,” “colonialist” and “genocidal” at Israel and its backers.

In today’s post-truth culture, “narrative” trumps facts. So, it matters not that “racist” Israel rescued tens of thousands of black Ethiopian Jews, “colonialist” Israeli Jews represent an ancient indigenous people, or the Palestinian population exploded by four to five times after “genocidal” Israel conquered the Gaza Strip and West Bank in 1967.

What should be newsworthy, as Professor John Spencer, chair of urban warfare studies at the Modern War Institute (MWI) at West Point, has noted, is that [“Israel has taken more measures](#) to avoid civilian harm than virtually any other nation that’s fought an urban war.” This though Hamas is perhaps the first armed movement to fight so as to maximize its own civilian casualties—not a “human shield” strategy but “CNN/al-Jazeera martyr” strategy.

Nevertheless, Spencer puts the non-combatant-to-combatant casualty ratio in the Gaza Strip at [close to 1:1](#), remarkably low in modern urban warfare. However, critical information is blasphemous to believers in “Palestinianism.” Hence, Spencer said in Washington late in March that he no longer gets interview requests.

Primo Levi, author of *Survival in Auschwitz*, wrote of the Holocaust that, “It happened; therefore, it can happen again. That is the core of what we have to say.” By their fashion statements, those who don the cloth swastikas, like U.S. Reps. Tlaib, Bush and Lee, identify themselves as would-be harbingers.

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