

A Caricature That Speaks Volumes...

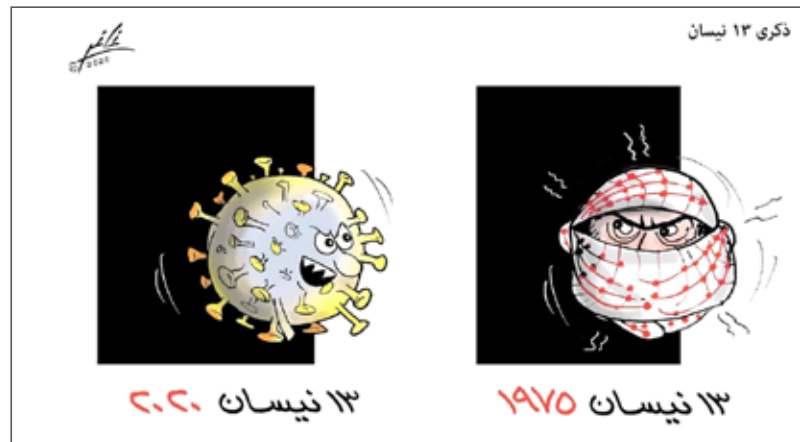
Malicious Trope in the Time of Covid-19

On April 14, 2020, *Aj-Joumhouriyya*, one of the few dailies still in print circulation, published a caricature on its last page to mark the 45th anniversary of the infamous April 13, 1975 and the event that inaugurated the “Two-Years War” – the prologue

of a long series of local, regional, and at times international armed conflict referred to politely and succinctly as the Lebanese “civil war.”

The caricature aimed to draw a comparison between the April 13 of 1975 and of 2020. Its author chose to symbolize the origin of the first through the strained profile of someone wearing a *keffiyeh*, a traditional scarf that is sometimes identified with the Palestinians, and the latter through a virion, the infective form of a virus at the microscopic level, which has been used to portray the coronavirus around the world. The message of the metaphor is clear: the Palestinians were the plague of 1975 while the coronavirus is the pandemic of 2020.

Upon publication, the caricature was promptly met with the usual disapproval, denunciation, and general disgust. To make matters worse, the author’s racist history was recalled as



the public pointed back to his overtly xenophobic TV cartoon from September 2019. As the tone mounted, the newspaper published what it called a “clarification.” Inappropriately, the clarification was fraught with vagueness and ambiguities. With a myriad of issues rocking the country, the case of the outrageous caricature was soon considered closed and the matter settled.

The fact is, however, that the case is far from being so easily closed.

On the one hand, the newspaper in question discharged itself through a “clarification” by pretexting that the caricature solely “expressed the opinion of its author.”

Obviously, this pathetic attempt at avoiding responsibility is simply ridiculous as it turns the newspaper into no less than a “sinful carrier”

Placing full responsibility for the outbreak of the Lebanese wars of 1975 at the feet of the Palestinians creates a favorable environment of attribution for other “refugees” with the pronounced hardships that Lebanon is experiencing today...

for such xenophobic attitudes. Moreover, the issue is hardly settled since the caricature shows to what extent the “war” is going on...

One need not be well versed in the events and propaganda of the Lebanese war to understand that the comparison between the Palestinian roles in the war and the coronavirus can easily be traced back to those events and propaganda. Nor does one need more than a smattering of general culture and historical understanding to be aware that malicious comparisons degrading human dignity and an affixation of “the other” to a sickness or to an insect were partly responsible in making it tolerable for perpetrators to commit some of the greatest atrocities of the previous decades, from the Shoah to the massacre of the Tutsi to Srebrenica. Simply put, these malevolent associations provide killers with enough rationale to excuse themselves from their wrongdoings.



The Lebanese Initiative Against Discrimination and Racism does not seek to construct a tribunal and issue a judgment of intentions. However, prudent action does not keep it from fearing that a metonymy hides behind one of the pillars of the incriminated caricature.

Given the series of discriminatory behavior and rhetoric targeting refugee communities in Lebanon—Palestinian, Syrian, or otherwise—leads one to be fearful for the attempted normalization at hand. Placing full responsibility for the outbreak of the Lebanese wars of 1975 at the feet of the Palestinians, (knowing that in 2008 the PLO publicly assumed a mea culpa in its share of responsibility and guilt while Lebanese actors did not), creates a favorable environment of attribution for other “refugees” with the pronounced hardships that Lebanon is experiencing today. Sadly, this tendency is already quite strong due to the accusations that have been made not only by eccentric populist leaders but also by some of the state’s highest figureheads.

It may be that we’re wrong but age-old wisdom advises one to suspect spiteful intents in situations of confusion and perplexity...

That said, the Lebanese Initiative Against Discrimination and Racism reiterates its invitation to all those who share its concerns to keep denouncing every strand of discriminatory behavior—be it verbal, illustrative, or other. The Initiative also re-amplifies its call to the Lebanese judiciary to undertake the appropriate measures of prosecution against every kind of discriminatory action, regardless of who bears responsibility for such act. It would be a shame to look back through the halls of history and say that because of its inaction the Lebanese judiciary was the passive accomplice in these acts

