



From Exodus to Marvel: The Israelification of Hollywood

Description

The introduction of an Israeli Mossad agent as the latest Marvel movie character crosses the line, even by Hollywood's poor moral standards. However, the Israeli superhero, Sabra, must be understood within the rational progression of the Israelification of Hollywood, a phenomenon that is surprisingly new.

Sabra is a relatively old character, dating back to a Marvel comic, the *Incredible Hulk*, in 1980. On September 10, however, it was announced that the Israeli character will be included in an upcoming Marvel film, *'Captain America: New World Order'*.

Expectedly, many pro-Palestine activists in the United States and around the world fumed. It is one thing to introduce an ordinary Israeli character, with the mere aim of normalizing Israel, an unrepentant apartheid state, in the eyes of Marvel's impressionable young audiences; but it is far more sinister to normalize a state intelligence agency, the Mossad, known for its numerous bloody assassinations, sabotage and torture.

By adding Sabra to its cast of superheroes, Marvel Studios has shown its complete disregard for the massive campaign by millions of fans around the world who, in 2017, protested the inclusion of a former Israeli soldier, Gal Gadot, as Marvel's *Wonder Woman*. Gadot is a vocal supporter of the Israeli government and military.

In response to the news, many rightly highlighted Hollywood's inherent bias, starting in the 1960's movie, *Exodus*, by Otto Preminger, with Paul Newman as the lead actor, which provided pseudo-historical justification for the colonization of Palestine by the Zionists. Ever since, Israel has been elevated, celebrated and included in an ever-positive context by Hollywood, while Muslims, Arabs and Palestinians continue to be vilified.

Although Israel was represented in a positive light by Hollywood filmmakers, the Israelis themselves were quite marginal in the content creation process. Until recently, the Israel construct was mostly built on behalf of Israel, not by Israel itself. "Things began to change in 1997," wrote Brian Schaefer in 'Moment Magazine'. It was then that the L.A. Federation's Entertainment Division and the Jewish

Agency launched the project, the 'Master Class', which, "for nearly 15 years ... brought countless actors, directors, producers, agents, managers and top studio and network executives to Israel, introducing many of them to the country for the first time, and taught Israelis how to pitch their projects."

The indoctrination of American actors and filmmakers through these visits and the introduction of many Israeli actors and filmmakers to Hollywood paid dividends, leading to a major change of narrative on Israel. Instead of simply communicating Israel to American and international audiences using references to historical victimization, positive association or even humor, Israelis began to make their case through Hollywood directly. And, unlike the haphazardness of past messages – good Israel, bad Arabs – the new messages are far more sophisticated, tailored around specific ideas, and designed with full awareness of the politics of each era.

Steven Spielberg's movie, *Munich* (2005), was released within the cultural context of the US invasion of Iraq as part of Washington's so-called 'war on terror', where human rights were violated on a global scale. *Munich* was a selective 'historical' account of the supposedly difficult choices that Israel, namely the Mossad, had to make to fight its own 'war on terror'. That was the era when Tel Aviv tirelessly underscored its affinity to Washington, now that both countries are purportedly victims of 'Islamic extremists'.

Unlike *Munich*, the widely popular TV series *Homeland* was not just another pro-Israel American argument that justifies Israeli wars and violence. The series itself, one of the most racist, islamophobic shows on television, was entirely modeled after the Israeli show *HaTufim* – 'Prisoners of War' or 'Abductees'. The writer and director of the Israeli show, Gideon Raff, has been included in the American version of the show, serving as an executive producer.

The change in the ownership of the narrative may seem superficial – as pro-Israel Hollywood propaganda is being replaced by organic Israeli propaganda. However, this is not the case.

The pro-Israel agenda of the past – the romanticization that followed the creation of Israel in 1948 – did not last long. The Israeli defeat of Arab armies in 1967 – thanks to the massive US military support of Tel Aviv – replaced the image of nascent, vulnerable Israel with that of the brave Israeli army, capable of defeating several militaries at once. It was then that Israeli soldiers toured US colleges and schools talking about their heroism on the battlefield. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the subsequent massacres, like that of Sabra and Shatila, forced a rethink.

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, Israel largely existed in Hollywood as a comic relief, from shows like *Friends*, *Frasier* and, more recently, the *Big Bang Theory*. References to Israel were often followed by a laugh – a clever, and effective way of linking Israel with positive, happy associations.

The 'war on terror', starting in 2001, coupled with the creation of the 'Master Class' project, allowed Israel to return to the Hollywood universe, not as an occasional reference, but as a staple, with Israeli shows, or joint US-Israeli productions, defining a whole new genre: making difficult choices to fight terrorism and ultimately save the world.

The exploitation of Israeli women on Magazine covers – for example, Maxim – was a whole different shady business, catering to a different audience. The half-naked Israeli army girls have succeeded, in the minds of many, in justifying war through sexual imagery. This genre became particularly popular following the bloody Israeli wars on Gaza, which killed thousands.

Israel's growing influence on the Marvel movies is a combination of all of these elements: the sexualization of the supposedly strong, empowered woman, the normalization of those who carry out Israeli crimes – Gadot, the soldier, Sabra, the Mossad agent – and the direct injection of Israeli priorities as part of everyday American reality.

Yet, there is a silver lining. For decades, Israel has hidden behind false, romanticized historical notions, making its case to the US and other western public, often indirectly. The wars on Gaza, the exponential growth of the Palestinian boycott movement and the proliferation of social media have, however, forced Israel out of hiding.

The new Hollywood Israel is now a warrior, often forced to make difficult moral choices, but it is, like its American counterpart, ultimately a force for good. Whether Israel will succeed in maintaining this image will depend on several factors, including the pro-Palestinian communities' ability to counter such falsehood and hasbara.

By Ramzy Baroud

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