

Review - Fauda

Written by Michael Koplow

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MICHAEL KOPLOW, MAY 10 2017

Fauda
by Lior Raz and Avi Issacharoff,
Yes – Satellite Television, 2015

To television-watching audiences, the Israeli hit television show *Fauda* is at once familiar and revelatory. An elite team of commandos looking to infiltrate a terrorist group, literal ticking time bombs, evil masterminds once thought to be dead but who turn up alive; all plot elements that will remind viewers of American thrillers like *24* or other post-9/11 fare. What makes *Fauda* a uniquely different show is not the plot, but the details. In showcasing the ways in which Israelis and Palestinians are willingly and unwillingly intimately entangled in each others lives, it paints one of the most realistic artistic portrayals of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict available and demonstrates why the purely black and white narratives on each side have always been more about winning a public relations war than about ending the actual war.

Fauda follows a group of Israeli undercover agents, known as *mista'arvim*, who carry out counter-terror operations in the West Bank by blending in to become indistinguishable from local Palestinian residents. The plot of the first season involves the recently retired Doron, who is called away from his wife, two kids, and the winery he now owns to temporarily rejoin his IDF unit and hunt down the arch-terrorist Abu Ahmad, whom Doron supposedly killed eighteen months before. Doron tracks down Abu Ahmad in disguise at his brother Bashir's wedding, shooting him but not capturing him, and Bashir gets killed in the process, setting off a chain of events driven by revenge and obsession on both sides that largely ends in tragedy. By season's end, Abu Ahmad has been killed at the hands of his own acolyte, Doron's family has been torn apart by his own actions and his wife's response to his physical and emotional absence, the *mista'arvim* unit itself has been disbanded after most of the unit goes rogue, and Doron himself is more adrift than when he started.

The show's twists and turns are engaging and convincing in their details, but that is not where the real action lies. What makes *Fauda* a show to think about long after watching it is the way in which characters are constantly faced with situations that require them to engage with their enemies in a non-acrimonious way, and not only do they do so, but they revel in it in a way that looks liberating. When Doron finds himself injured and dazed following an operation gone very wrong, his first instinct is not to head home but to go deeper into the West Bank and eventually into the arms of his Palestinian girlfriend, with whom he evinces a deeper emotional connection than with his wife despite the fact that she is blind to his true identity. When Abu Ahmad's wife is faced with a choice between accepting Israeli help to save her daughter's injured eye or standing on principle, she does not hesitate to throw principles over the side and by the end of the process appears unburdened in a way that would have been impossible had she remained in the West Bank.

But the complexity of the conflict is revealed not only in moments of crisis. In ways large and small, the players on both sides demonstrate their willingness to cross lines both good and bad. The embrace of Palestinian culture by the members of the *mista'arvim* unit is unmistakable and will be immediately familiar to anyone who has immersed themselves in a foreign country or foreign language. The admiration the Palestinian terrorists have for Israeli products, expertise, and ingenuity also comes shining through. But even more so, the ways in which both sides are willing to violate norms and go to extremes that seem like caricatures of the real world are startling in that the series

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exposes both Israelis and Palestinians to this treatment. For Israelis insistent that there will never be peace until the Palestinians love their children more than they hate Israelis, there is the wrenchingly unsettling scene where Abu Ahmad gives the order to effectively sacrifice his daughter in order to detonate a bomb implanted in an Israeli hostage. For Palestinians insistent that Israel is a fundamentally immoral occupier engaged in serial human rights abuses, there are the scenes of Doron holding a gun to the head of a defenseless Palestinian girl and members of his team torturing a terrorist cleric for information. *Fauda* manages to accomplish a rare feat of capturing both Israelis and Palestinians in their worst and most savage moments while at the same time revealing the complicated humanity that drives their terrible actions.

Perhaps more starkly than anything else, *Fauda* exposes the way in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict represents not a cycle of violence, but an iterated Prisoner's Dilemma, where both sides would clearly be better off cooperating but instead have fallen into a tit-for-tat war of attrition that continually escalates. The season begins with a relatively simple mission with a small footprint, and quickly escalates to a place where neither side is willing to blink as the forest fire they have set consumes everything around them. It is clear that the two sides are past the point of no return in being able to coexist, yet they cannot bring themselves to do what is needed to end their mutually destructive relationship.

Israelis and Palestinians will have to separate if there is ever to be peace in the Holy Land. It is the only viable way to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and there is no way around the fact that anything short of separating into two states will lead to even more and further prolonged violence, bloodshed, and international isolation for both sides. The beauty of *Fauda* and the tragic lesson it imparts is that separation is the logical answer, but it need not have been preordained. Both sides in this conflict have legitimate grievances and both take actions – even if they are not equivalently morally reprehensible – that fly in the face of decency. But Israelis and Palestinians are alike in many ways and share not only a physical space but a cultural and emotional one as well. If each side could recognize its partial reflection in the other, then perhaps the Israeli-Palestinian past and the Israeli-Palestinian future would look a lot different.

About the author:

Michael J. Koplow is the policy director of the Israel Policy Forum. His work has appeared in *Security Studies*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The National Interest*, *Foreign Policy*, *The American Interest*, and *The Atlantic*, among other publications. He is the editor of *Matzav*, a leading source for commentary and analysis on Israeli politics, society, and foreign policy, and is the author of the *Ottomans and Zionists* blog. He tweets from @mkoplow