

Palestine

A tortured and elusive homeland

Kiran Omar

As the world geared up for the Tuesday January 20th inaugural party in Washington D.C. that would install President-elect Obama as the first black president in the White House, the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians living in Gaza turned into a nightmare. The Israeli attack on the unarmed civilians of Gaza claimed over 1000 lives and inflicted millions of dollars in damage to Gaza's infrastructure, businesses and homes. Bombs, shells, and mortars rained down relentlessly on the defenceless citizens. Even the UN Headquarters was not spared the Israeli brutality: their headquarters in Gaza city lost all the stockpiles of food, water, medicines and other relief supplies to bomb and mortar fire.

The attack on Gaza came after a 6-month, Egyptian-brokered ceasefire expired. During the ceasefire, the Israeli authorities, in collaboration with Hosni Mubarak's Egypt, cut Gaza off from all essential supplies, including water and medicine. The Palestinians were not even allowed near the sea so that they may fish and eat. Despite the clear and inhuman violations of the ceasefire, the world ignored this collective punishment which turned Gaza into a concentration camp.

On December 27th, on the pretext of responding to missile attacks from Gaza, the Israeli armed forces launched a coordinated offensive upon Gaza from land, air and sea. Earlier, foreign minister Tzipi Livni, also running as a candidate for Prime Minister, made it clear that one of her primary tasks, if elected, would be to overthrow HAMAS decisively – even though HAMAS was democratically elected by the

Palestinian people in line with a US-sponsored initiative. Tzipi Livni and most of the Israeli administration refuse to sit down to negotiate any sort of peace with HAMAS, though they know there can be no peace without them.

Israel's aggression rapidly grew in both intensity and ferocity. She enforced a complete blockade of humanitarian aid to the entrapped population. The offensive claimed over 1300 Palestinian lives. It ended after 22 days with an uneasy and very fragile cease-fire, which was conveniently brokered in time for Obama's inauguration. Given the evidence, it is not unreasonable to suspect that the ceasefire had more to do with the inauguration of President Obama than any genuine desire for peace on the part of the Israeli administration.

The January assault on Gaza was nothing new, but the ferocity with which it was unleashed on a densely populated civilian area, and the disproportionate level of the Israeli response to the alleged rocket fire from Gaza, shocked the world, and even the staunchest allies of Israel were moved to voice their displeasure. The world resounded with cries of outrage, albeit "unofficial". Most governments, especially in the Western world, still remain unwilling to identify the State of Israel as an outright aggressor and to call for the immediate withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza strip. The Western powers continue to ignore the long blockade of food that threatened to starve the Gaza population, the Israeli denial of urgently needed medical supplies, and the tightening military noose of barriers, road-blocks and check-points and the Separating Wall, that severely restrict move-

ment of goods and services and occasion daily humiliations of ordinary Palestinians. It is these violations of fundamental human rights that fuel Palestinian anger and hopelessness.

What was shocking too was the refusal of the UN to name Israel as the perpetrator of this aggression. By their silence Western politicians and the media encourage this latest holocaust against the Palestinians and become accomplices to crimes against humanity. It sadly reflects the ineffectiveness of Ban Ki Moon and the marginalization of the UN on the geopolitical stage. The UN, which was created to act as an impartial and just arbitrator, a voice of reason and a force for peace in international affairs, has been increasingly reduced to a delivery mechanism for aid to countries beset by man-made and natural catastrophes on an emergency footing. The US, by the continuous use of its veto, sabotages every session of the Security Council and UN Human Rights Committees on decisions concerning the Palestinian predicament.

Thousands of enraged human-rights activists and concerned citizens took to the streets in protest against the cruel Gaza campaign and events were organised to inform the general public and increase pressure on world leaders and their governments to bring an end to this human tragedy and ensure that the Palestinian people receive justice and are able to live in peace in their rightful homeland. There were strident calls to name the atrocities for what they really were: Genocide, war crimes and ethnic cleansing. The world's leaders have proved to be moral dwarfs.

Today, over 50% of Palestinians live in exile globally, with the largest concentrations in

the Arab-speaking world. The remaining populations that have been squeezed into increasingly tight, apartheid-like areas like the West Bank and Gaza, where they live like minorities within their "homeland", with few rights and many restrictions enforced by the State of Israel. As a result of constant armed confrontation, displacement and forced migration, much of the Palestinian population residing in the West Bank and Gaza, is very young; it is estimated that about half the population is 20 years or younger, with early marriages and high fertility rates. Their sufferings under Israeli occupation have filled them with despair, especially as most of the rest of the world seems to condone Israel's brutalities.

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However, there are strong voices that keep the fires of hope burning in young and old hearts alike. Among the many poignant voices is the voice of beloved and revered poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941 – 2008) whose poetry is a powerful cry of the wounded, the dis-

possessed, and expresses most eloquently the harsh pain of exile. He explores in his poetry the thirst for identity and the relentless search both within and without, for a "homeland". It is rooted deep inside every being, this yearning to be connected to one's land and history. A history not written merely in clay and stone, but a history featured in the landscapes of collective narratives.

One of the more deliberate attempts by the State of Israel to obliterate this landscape has been the systematic program of home demolitions and destruction of traditional orchards and farming areas. Palestinians have raised their flocks, grown olives and harvested the bounties of their land in these fertile tracts since before Biblical times. The lemon groves and fruit orchards have been tenderly and watchfully husbanded by generations of weathered farmers and their families, tied to this storied land for count-

less generations. What better way of severing the umbilical ties to the land than demolishing homes that have birthed and housed unbroken lines of Palestinians? Ravishing and bulldozing historic orchards and fields systematically and deliberately, the Israeli occupiers have changed the landscape beyond recognition in an effort to erase the memories of home from the hearts of Palestinians.

The callous brutality of these home demolitions is not supported by all Israelis, and there is a growing awareness that the State of Israel does not speak for all Jews today. There are a growing number of Jewish voices of dissent and protest that distance themselves from their State's aggressive and inhumane policies. One of them is the Israeli peace activist and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Jeff Halper. He is the co-founder of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolition (ICAHAD). An anthropologist, human rights' activist and author, Mr. Halper was nominated by the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize committee along with the Palestinian intellectual and activist, Ghassan Andoni.

Mr. Halper argues that the State of Israel does not represent all Jews, and that today there is growing resistance amongst the Jewish population against the forceful occupation of Palestinian land, the demolition of Arab homes and the deliberate siege of Gaza. The occupation is illegal by international law, and the occupiers **can and should be** tried for war crimes. The demolition of homes and land acquisition is deliberate and systematized to force the Palestinian populations to flee their homeland. The process amounts to ethnic cleansing. The time has come, he urges, to change the terminology in the media and popular press: terms like "apartheid", "ethnic cleansing" and

even "genocide" **can be** and **should be** applied to describe the situation of the Palestinians being decimated in their own land. Not surprisingly, Mr. Halper's voice is not frequently heard in mainstream US and Western Media.

In his view, the destruction of homes is a way in which the State asserts its power. The continued occupation has all the hallmarks of **apartheid** rule as it segregates, deliberately and forcibly, the Arab populations from the Jewish ones, with separate infrastructures, services, rights or the lack thereof. In some instances, the apartheid practiced today in Gaza and the Occupied Territories goes even further in its harshness than to the one practiced in South Africa. There is an urgent and immediate need to "re-frame" the context of the Israel-Palestinian conflict: Will Palestinians be allowed true sovereignty over their land where they can develop economically? Will they have control over their borders and resources and enjoy complete

freedom of movement? Or will they be encircled in a tightly controlled enclave, a "Bantustan" style ghetto with ultimate control residing with the State of Israel? The answer to these questions will determine whether there is going to be peace in the Middle East or not. Ironically, the Jews in pre-war Europe, for instance under the Pale of Settlement in Tsarist Russia, lived in precisely the conditions of forced encirclement that they have now inflicted on

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the Palestinians.

It is imperative to re-frame the conflict and contextualize it in human-rights terms:

- 1) There **is** an Occupation and it is pro-active;
- 2) Israel **is** the strong party in the equation and

thus the occupying power;

3) Israel is **NOT** fighting for its existence, it is expanding steadily its areas of control;

4) “Terrorism” is a symptom of an underlying and unacceptable malady, and is being practiced by the State of Israel.

The thrust of the discourse has to shift and responsibility rest squarely on the State of Israel if any meaningful peace solution is to be explored. The present discourse revolves around a construct of violence and terror. It keeps the cycle of violence in motion.

It falls on every individual who reflects on humanism and human rights to apply sustained pressure through media, elected representatives and the alternative media to change perceptions and bring a just and fair resolution to the Palestinian question. The end of Apartheid in South Africa was hard fought and a direct result of a highly motivated and engaged civil society asserting itself for change. The government of South Africa had no recourse

but to crumble faced with sustained internal and international pressure. The boycott of South African products and proving the illegality of the “white only” government was central in ending Apartheid. This same pressure must be brought to bear on the Israeli government to put an end to the hardships of Palestinians – the trauma of war, dispossession, disenfranchisement, humiliation and imprisonment in their own land.

I recently had the opportunity of watching an excellent documentary entitled “Occupation 101” (<http://www.occupation101.com>) that

gives a fair account of the Palestinian issue to date and contextualizes the situation with clarity and facility. This award-winning documentary is extremely important for those who seek to understand the history and roots of the present Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It delves into the beginnings of the Zionist expansionism, and defines the parameters of the conflict. Firmly based on facts and detailed research, it dispels many long-held myths and misconceptions about the improbability of lasting peace in the region.

The film presents, as dispassionately as possible, daily life and its degradations faced by the Palestinian population under the Occupation. The slow and systematic erosion of their rights, violations of their civil liberties and possessions, and the demolition of homes, are documented as part of a deliberate strategy by the State of Israel. It focuses on the expulsion of the Palestinians from their historic lands. The pivotal and crucial role played by successive US administrations and powerful lobby groups is clearly demonstrated.

The foreign-policy decision makers in Washington, D.C., work closely with lobbyists representing a multi-billion dollar arms and security industry that grows steadily and exponentially. The Zionist lobby groups who are reinforced by the rapid rise of Neocons and the extreme right constitute another major factor in the equation. These combined forces are a formidable and almost unsurmountable hurdle blocking the path to a lasting and sustainable peace in the Middle East.

*The unbelievable war crimes that Israel is committing in Gaza... it makes me ashamed to be a Jew.
The servile way in which Canada is supporting the U.S. position—basically it’s all Hamas’s fault because of missiles that they throw over in desperation—I think this reluctance of Canada to use its influence makes me ashamed to be Canadian.*

Anton Kuerti, acclaimed concert pianist (on the Israeli attack on Gaza, 2009)

“Occupation 101” features scholars, journalists, historians, political activists and religious leaders from all faiths, who are seldom heard from in the mainstream US media. These are voices of reason and wisdom that are muted and silenced. Ironically, many of these voices, like Noam Chomsky, Jeff Halper, Amira Hass of Haaretz, etc. are regarded as the most reasonable and respected by intellectuals and humanitarian workers the world over.

It is incumbent upon us as world citizens us join hands and participate in the discourse to end the Occupation of the Palestinian lands. It is time for solidarity with Jewish and other voices that were being raised in protest against the Occupation, along with human rights activists. It is high time to bring deliberate and sustained pressure on world politicians and policy makers to make the State of Israel review and end its aggressive and expansionist policies and actively embark on a serious quest for lasting peace in the region.

Despite the ravages of war and the suffering the Palestinian people have endured, their resilience and indomitable spirit remain unbroken. Their humanism, compassion and stoicism throughout their entire nightmare, shines bright as sunlight. People who can pick themselves up and have the courage to move forward, against all odds, can never be defeated or annihilated. The love for their land is steadfast and unwavering; they are closely tied to it and have an ancient understanding of its cycles. There is also an understanding that the State of Israel is not representative of all Jewish people. There is still a willingness to coexist and live in harmony – a deep need to coexist with their neighbours and share normal, ordinary lives.

It would serve us well to look back to a time long past, when Jews and Muslims lived as a unified, harmonious community in Andalusia and the Maghreb, when Jews fleeing the rigours and horrors of the Inquisition were given refuge in the Maghreb, when there was great intellectual and scientific discourse and a flowering of learning from the interaction of people. That

spirit of accommodation and harmony still lives on in the heart of Palestine – both among Palestinians and Israelis, and it must come to prevail again in the ancient lands of Palestine before it is too late.

I cannot help but end with this poignant poem written by Mahmud Darwish, who wrote of the anguish of occupation and losing one’s homeland:

I Am There

by Mahmud Darwish

*I come from there and I have memories
Born as mortals are, I have a mother
And a house with many windows,
I have brothers, friends,
And a prison cell with a cold window.
Mine is the wave, snatched by sea-gulls,
I have my own view,
And an extra blade of grass.
Mine is the moon at the far edge of the
words,*

*And the bounty of birds,
And the immortal olive tree.
I walked this land before the swords
Turned its living body into a laden table.*

*I come from there. I render the sky unto her
mother*

*When the sky weeps for her mother.
And I weep to make myself known
To a returning cloud.*

*I learnt all the words worthy of the court of
blood*

So that I could break the rule.

*I learnt all the words and broke them up
To make a single word: **Homeland...***

Reference

For Jeff Halper’s views visit the website www.icahd.org. The article is entitled: “The Key to Peace: Dismantling the Matrix of Control”

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