

Gaza and the World: Will Things Ever Change?

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In times of crisis, most Arabs tune in to Aljazeera television. Sometimes it's comforting for the truth to be stated the way it is, with all of its gory and unsettling details, without blemishes and without censorship. When Israel carried out massive air strikes against Gaza on Saturday, December 27, terrorizing an already hostage and malnourished population, I too tuned in to Aljazeera.

Within seconds I learned of the tally: 290 deaths and climbing, with 700 more wounded, all in one day. But as dramatic as this event may have seemed – the highest Israeli inflicted death toll in one day in Palestine since Israel's establishment in 1948 – there was nothing new to learn. Tragedies anywhere – natural or manmade – tend to lead to social, cultural, economic and political upheavals, revolutions even, that somehow alter the social, cultural, economic and ultimately political landscapes in the affected regions, save in Palestine.

I gazed pointlessly at the screen. Learning of the aftermath of such tragedies seems more of a ritual than a purposeful habit. The Arab and international responses to the killings can only serve as a reminder of how ineffectual and irrelevant, if not complacent their timid mutterings are.

Once again the US blamed Palestinians, and the Hamas "thugs" using words that defy logic, such as "Israel has the right to defend itself." The statement remains as ludicrous as ever, for a country like Israel with an army that possesses the world's most lethal weapons, including nuclear arms, cannot possibly feel threatened by an imprisoned population whose only defense mechanism are fertilizer-based homemade rockets. While Israel has killed and wounded thousands of Palestinians in Gaza (one thousand on Saturday alone) a handful of Israelis have reportedly died as a direct result of the Palestinian rockets in years. Do numbers matter at all?

European governments chose their words carefully, "expressing concern", "calling on Israel to use restraint" and so on. Arab governments were, as usual, distracted with trivialities, protocols and easily lost sight of the crisis at hand.

Then, the same, ever predictable outbursts began. Passionate callers from all over the world called various TV and radio stations in the Middle East and shouted, yelled, cried, vented, called on God, called on Arab leaders, called on all of those with "living conscience" to do something. In turn, audiences too cried at home as they listened to the heated commentary and watched footage of heaps of Palestinian bodies throughout the Gaza Strip.

The passion soon spilled to the streets of Arab capitals, of course under the ever-vigilant eyes of Arab police and secret services. Flags of US and Israel, and in some cases Egypt were set ablaze along with effigies of Bush and Israeli leaders.

'Rising up to the occasion' some Arab governments declared, with much hype their intention to send an airplane or two of medicine and food to Gaza, a few boxes clad with the donor country's flag, flashed endlessly on local media. Meanwhile, news reports spoke of Palestinians attempting to flee the Gaza prison into the Sinai desert. They were met with decisive Egyptian security presence at the border.

Strangely enough, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas remained faithful to the script, despite Gaza's unprecedented tragedy. On Sunday, he blamed Hamas for the bloodbath. "We talked to them (Hamas) and we told them, 'please, we ask you, do not end the truce. Let the truce continue and not stop', so that we could have avoided what happened."

Was Mr. Abbas informed of the fact that Hamas hasn't carried out one suicide bombing since 2005? Or that the 'truce' never compelled Israel to allow Palestinians in Gaza access to basic necessities and medicine? Or that it was Israel that attacked Gaza in November, killing several people, claiming that it obtained information of a secret Hamas plot?

Even stranger that while Abbas has chosen such a position, many Israelis are not convinced that the war on Gaza was at all related to the Hamas' rockets, and is in fact an election ploy for desperate politicians vying for Israel's dominating right wing vote in the upcoming February elections. In fact, the Israeli design against Gaza had little to do with the 'escalation' of the rocket attacks of mid December.

"Long-term preparation, careful gathering of information, secret discussions, operational deception and the misleading of the public – all these stood behind the Israel Defense Forces "Cast Lead" operation against Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip," wrote the Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz on December 28, which also revealed that the plan had been in effect for six months.

"Like the US assault on Iraq and the Israeli response to the abduction of IDF reservists Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser at the outset of the Second Lebanon War, little to no weight was apparently devoted to the question of harming innocent civilians," said Haaretz.

And why should Israel devote a moment to the question of harming civilians or violating international law or any such seemingly irrelevant notions – as far as Israel is concerned – as long as their "Palestinian partners", the Arab League, or the international community continue to teeter between silence, complacency, rhetoric and inaction?

By Thursday, January 1, the death toll climbed to 420, according to Palestinian medics and news reports, and over 2000 wounded. A doctor from a Khan Yunis clinic in Gaza told me on the phone, "scores of the wounded are clinically dead. Others are so badly disfigured; I felt that death is of greater mercy for them than living. We had no more room at the Qarara Clinic. Body parts cluttered the hallways. People screamed in endless agony and we had not enough medicine or pain killers. So we had to choose which ones to treat and which not to. In that moment I genuinely wished I was killed in the Israeli strikes myself, but I kept running trying to do something, anything."

Until Arab countries and nations translate their chants and condemnations into a practical and meaningful political action that can bring an end to the Israeli onslaughts against Palestinians, all that is likely to change are the numbers of dead and wounded. But still, one has to wonder if Israel kills a thousand more, ten thousand, or half of Gaza, will the US still

blame Palestinians? Will Egypt open its Gaza border? Will Europe express the same “deep concern”? Will the Arabs issue the same redundant statements? Will things ever change? Ever?

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