

The Gaza “Disengagement”

Opportunity Knocks

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Formal talks between Palestinian President Mahmood Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon were put on hold this week. The first face to face dialogue between the two since the “disengagement” of the Gaza Strip was sidelined for a second time because of a difference in “objectives.” Israel essentially intends on acting as the High Court, examining Palestinian requests, while Palestinians—trying to break Israel’s cycle of unilateral procedure—demand action and fundamental change. This postponement symbolizes the Palestinian people’s unending struggle in their efforts to achieve justice.

It is not a coincidence that Israeli forces have already invaded the Gaza Strip in the post-disengagement era, reserving the “right” to reinvade in the future. The power and the decision to exert it rests firmly in Sharon’s hands as it has since the start of US President George Bush’s “war on terror.” The world witnessed the onslaught of Israel’s Operation First Rain two weeks ago. According to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), the invasion left 8 Palestinian civilians dead, 35 civilians injured, and over 300 arrested. By taking on the role of a strict warden, Sharon will show mercy on the Palestinian prisoners, so long as they exhibit their ability to fall in line and follow his orders. Until then, it is lights out in the Occupied Territories.

Regrettably, President Abbas sits silently in the background, without political or military ammunition. Palestinian web portal, The Electronic Intifada, quoted a Palestinian police officer stating, “At least give us enough bullets to protect people and protect our stations.” The evolution of competent and equipped security forces in the Occupied Territories is exactly what Sharon is trying to avoid. Sharon’s minions cleverly proclaim that they cannot give the Palestinian Authority (PA) weapons, ammunition, military vehicles and other security equipment until Abbas and the PA have earned Israel’s trust. Both parties know, however, that the PA cannot combat militant groups, or better yet, create a firm presence and authority, without first having the proper equipment.

Sharon’s credo is to maximize the lawlessness of the conflict. This furthers the greater agenda: the expansion of settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and the appropriation of Palestinian land by way of extension of the Apartheid Wall. The infighting in Palestinian society has emboldened Sharon’s modus operandi and exemplifies the lack of rule in Gaza. All the while, Sharon plays the part of the “peacemaker” who is just waiting for the Palestinians to get their act together.

Since the “disengagement” of the Gaza Strip little has been mentioned of the 30 Palestinians killed, the many more wounded, the houses destroyed, or the continual restriction of movement. While Abbas has called for the release of the 7000 Palestinian

prisoners in Israeli jails, next to nothing has been said of the torture of Palestinian prisoners, or the objectivity of the Israeli courts sentencing the Palestinians apprehended.

According to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, the Israeli Occupation Force (IOF) will recommend that the Israeli government “release additional Palestinian prisoners” in a move to strengthen the position of President Abbas. Any concession from Israel is welcome. One must look, however, at what is being conceded. In the last month, Israeli forces have detained nearly 600 Palestinians. If the IOF continues its mass arrest campaign, then releases 400 prisoners as it had in June of this year, the magnitude of the release will be quite small. The Palestinian Prisoners Committee and the Red Cross Committee told Al Jazeera that “most of the [Palestinians] released [in June] were prisoners whose sentences were due to end or had already ended.” Israel is using smoke and mirror maneuvers to appease the international community while the situation on the ground remains the same or worsens. The Bethlehem based Ma’an news agency reported this week that Walid Khaled, held already for 51 months *without being charged*, will be detained for a twelfth consecutive term under a renewed Israeli order. This “administrative detention,” is in stark contrast to international law, which according to human rights group B’Tselem, “prohibits the transfer of detainees outside of occupied territory.” Based on IOF numbers (which are believed to be much higher), B’Tselem found that 596 Palestinians were held in “administrative detention” as of August of this year.

The occupation presses forward, suffocating the will of the majority of the Palestinian people who want an end to the conflict and violence. It is not enough to throw the Palestinians a bone once in a while. The Palestinian leadership must straighten its spine and demand that the international community pressure Israel to make fundamental concessions. The issues concerning the control of the borders, water, airspace, ports and goods coming in and out of Gaza remains unresolved. The deteriorating conditions of poverty, malnutrition and unemployment in the Occupied Territories, as the world witnessed prior to the second Intifada, wane on Palestinian public opinion. Those in Israel who support peace must not forgo this opportunity to initiate calm and bring justice to a besieged people. A “window of opportunity,” is only meaningful if Israeli society takes advantage of situation and demands cooperation from its leadership. It would be a shame if the state of Israel became known for, “never missing an opportunity to miss an opportunity.”

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