

A PLEA FOR PALESTINIAN SELF-CRITICISM

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What is happening to Gaza? Why is she sad, steeped in misery and bruised, her blood continuing to be spilt and her tears shed? Why are the streets dirty, heavy with the odor of despair, breathing out anguish and disgust? Why is Gaza moaning under the weight of neglect, the swords of hooligans, bullies and various false banners?

I remember the day [in September 2005] the Israeli occupation forces left the Gaza Strip, locking the doors behind them (that chapter was closed). People from all Palestinian factions, each with his own color and flag, jammed the streets in celebration, joyously proclaiming the departure of the defeated enemy. Soon after, we took to bickering about terms and expressions: Shall we say the Israelis suffered “a total defeat” or “a withdrawal” or “a forced exit” ... etc.? But neither nuances of language nor our moments of joy helped in answering the most pressing question: Where do we go from here? We heard a lot about the coming of a “prosperous future,” the transformation of Gaza

into an industrial and commercial hub. In those festive days we were optimistic, expecting that the blood of our martyrs and those who lay injured, and the pain of our prisoners were not suffered in vain. We hoped soon to see the fruits of our many sacrifices. Nonetheless, that “culture of life” now feels distant, and in its place we find adolescent slogans depicting reality in simple black-and-white terms.

Life has become a sorrow, a nightmare and an unbearable burden. Today, I ask myself a daring and fearful question: Why did the occupation return to Gaza? An all-too-easy response would be: Because that’s the nature of our enemy! And our genius analysts will come forth to present a studied rationale that outshines the wisest men of past eras. But, I’m not here to expose the very real crimes and horrors of the occupation — which Palestinians both young and old already know all too well. Instead, I want us to look at ourselves squarely in the mirror and face up to our own mistakes. We always fear speaking out clearly about our errors, and we’ve gotten accustomed to hiding them under

the same pat answers. Still, what does the current chaos, lawlessness, random killings, infringements on public land, clashes between families, strewn pedestrian walkways ... what does all this have to do with the occupation? We've gotten in the habit of blaming others for our own failures, and we are still plagued by conspiracy theories that inhibit our ability to think beyond a small, acceptable circle under our noses. Our ongoing problem is that we tend to be reactive rather than proactive, and when we do act, we rarely know how to proceed to our real advantage.

I don't dispute that the Israeli occupation left behind mounting layers of crises and complexities in all walks of Gazan life. But shouldn't we be asking whether we ourselves added to the burden of our

near-exhausted people? And whether our people's resources are being squandered by deleterious practices for which no party and no faction is above blame?

That question again: Why didn't we safeguard our "free" Gaza? Had we not repeatedly stated that we're in favor of liberating any square inch of land? Here we are today having thousands of square inches — 365 square kilometers — in our hands. Nevertheless, we didn't succeed in preserving this grant, and we managed to waste it in myriad ways.

Conducting a simple survey of casualties we've suffered from Israel since it

withdrew its occupying forces from Gaza, I found the following: More than 500 Palestinians have been killed and more than 3,000 injured, of whom about 200 have been severely disabled; 150 houses have been demolished, in addition to the destruction of bridges, power stations and other infrastructure. In contrast, Israeli casualties caused (largely) by our crude missiles total not more than three or four. One might answer that the issue is not a matter of numbers alone but involves a cumulative process that will pay dividends in the future. That is true. But isn't there a way for us to reduce our casualties and in-

crease our gains through a calm, well-considered approach free of high-pitched heroism and mob-style rhetoric?

When we walk the streets of Gaza we cannot but be appalled by what we see: disorder on an indescribable

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scale, indifferent policemen, swaggering young men with weapons draped over their shoulders, big families reenacting ancient blood feuds, all amid a general disregard for the public welfare. Very often you hear of a murder late at night followed by the swift retaliation of those who take the law into their own hands. Our Gaza has been turned into a garbage dump where rotten odors and raw sewage are pervasive. The government is helpless to do anything — opposition factions sit idly by or fight among themselves; the president stands powerless. As a consequence, we have been reduced to the level of blind wanderers.

Life as we live it now in Gaza is, without exaggeration, the embodiment of misery. We applauded the general election [in January 2006] and its reaffirmation of our democracy, but the overall reality is that we have suffered a severe setback. We talked of a national consensus, but sectarian divisions have swept aside that notion like a feather in the wind. The resistance movement — and I bow in appreciation and respect to its heroic achievements — also has made mistakes; it has become fragmented, with each faction acting “in its own image” in the absence of any shared political vision. At times, the resistance has ensnared itself in factional competition, with different groups issuing conflicting statements and, amid a kind of military exhibitionism, claiming credit for the same armed actions. We’ve even avoided talking about mistakes that have been made for fear of being labeled “anti-resistance.” Indeed, we’ve all effectively covered up these faults in one fashion or another. So, when great efforts are being expended to reopen a border crossing so as to ease the pressure on our citizens, we’re surprised to find that others among us are at the same time firing rockets at that very crossing point. And while some parties are proclaiming the high importance of achieving a state of calm, someone else defies that effort and launches another rocket at Israel! Certainly, I don’t deny that Israeli occupation forces perpetrate massacres and randomly slaughter our people, and that they need no provocation to commit such acts, but here I want to focus on what is within our own power to reconsider and change.

The resistance has, from the very beginning, played a pivotal role in our struggle against the occupation, and it

cannot be discarded. But I beg you, do not weaken it from within, do not invite it to be the object of criticism, and, as you have always said, safeguard her purity — the purity of her weapons, and the purity of her goals.

I was asking myself: Where are the gains of the resistance when our country, at its core, is saturated with chaos, corruption, hooliganism, and the random and pointless tit-for-tat killings that sectarianism has fueled? Isn’t building the homeland a part of the resistance? Are not hygiene, public order and respect for the law parts of the resistance? Isn’t strengthening our social fabric a part of the policy that will shorten the life of the occupation? We have neglected to keep the resistance in harmony with other means toward our aim. So now, as we survey our landscape, we see the resistance in one valley, politics in still another, and the people isolated in a separate valley of their own. There is no common ground serving to unify the whole.

The abduction of foreign journalists has become an acceptable practice in the pursuit of petty aims. And no attention is paid to whether our cause is the ultimate loser or if our image will suffer in the eyes of the world. Instead, what matters most is that a specific faction will gain media attention and become the focus of cameras and news broadcasters.

Gaza is witnessing today an unprecedented state of adolescence. It is like a child who has no goal or direction. You see a great deal of activity reported by the media from Gaza, but does it depict actual developments impacting reality or is it only a high-profile façade? Or is it that we resemble a wood hewer working in the dark of night not knowing what he hews and what he breaks? Sometimes we let

ourselves be deceived when we see all these conferences, meetings and statements reported while there are no traces of any effects in the real world. We do a lot of talking; we tread water and steal our people's blood and deny them a moment of rest. So, the number of wretched households are many. And many are those who find no escape from misery, and many are those who cry out but no one hears.

I say, be merciful to Gaza! Save her from your hooliganism and chaos, your useless use of weapons, your gangsters. Save her from your political haggling..., let her live a little, and breathe a little. Save Gaza by consulting your reason before you act on blind passions..., by elevating homeland issues above party and factional ones..., by practicing real solidarity with the wretched and oppressed..., by giving serious attention to the mistakes we have made and covered up.

I'll find many who will agree with my words, and many who will reject what I've said, and many too who do not want to deal with these issues at all. Some will search

hard for what they consider gaps in my logic and will interpret my words in a way that lets them get back at me twice over. But may God be my witness, I would not have written this if it were not for my worries about Gaza and its people, my worries about our homeland, and my urgent desire that we forge a framework of opportunity for our people, and convey to them in the clearest terms that we are emphatically with them and that through them we will all realize ourselves. I repeat, so that no one will be inclined to claim otherwise: I acknowledge all that is said about the occupation and its savageness and nefarious schemes — documenting these would fill volumes — but, at this time, I beg that we subject our own deeds to a fair trial. A trial presided over by the clear interests of our people. Evading accountability will only add to our pain and wound us further. Let us have the courage to say that we got it right in some instances and wrong in others. Then you will find the face of Gaza, the face of the homeland, radiate new hope for our future.