



After the upsurge of violence and killings in Gaza in the end of December 2008 two distinguished persons linked to the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, a Palestinian and an Israeli, wrote a back to back article calling upon peacebuilders in the world to unite and take action, and about the need to transform mindsets away from militarism and martyrdom.

A LETTER TO PEACEBUILDERS IN THE WORLD

By Edy Kaufman*

We welcome the opportunity to connect with the hundreds of peace/conflict prevention and resolution organizations around the world, to update you about the terrible situation resulting from the confrontation between Hamas and Israel. We believe that you are informed about the overall sad picture, with more than a thousand people killed and four thousand wounded- the overwhelming majority in Gaza- and between a quarter to half of them non

combatants. We are not into blaming the “Other”, and there is no point here to focus on cause and effect, who started this last round of violence; what we need is introspection and accountability. We all know that it is illegal and immoral for the Israel Defense Forces involved in the targeted killings of individuals, collective punishment, restricting basic needs to access through the crossings into the Gaza Strip, and causing a large number of casualties among women and children. We also know that the targeting of the civilian population by Hamas in Southern Israel over a long period of time, and the intention of causing a large number of victims- even if such aim was not reached – is reprehensive and inhuman.

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Let me focus on what has been the impact of such a war on individuals and groups both in the Palestinian and Israeli civil society that have been dedicated to peacebuilding across the divide. Once more, the de-humanization of the “Other” has become the prevailing trend in both our societies. The media reports one own casualties with pictures and names, whereas the dead of the enemy are only mentioned in small print faceless statistics. Both sides feel they

are the victims and are not willing to concede that there is a real situation of shared victimhood. Those who take military **action** believe that the only language that the “enemy” understands is force and the only recourse left is to **react with violence**. That once more, the forces of extremism and militarism in our own societies are stopping the prospect of peace and will again leave us, when the guns fall silent, in an untenable status-quo.

Being part of our own people, the first reaction is also anger, frustration and a sense of powerlessness; but, on second thoughts, the challenge is not to fall into depression and subsequently, remain passive. Demonstrations, silent marches, medical relief convoys, collection of blankets and more have been taking place in Israel. Some of us found ourselves immersed in arduous efforts to search for common ground. During and after the Gaza asymmetrical war, so far, the coalition of Israeli and Palestinian Peace NGOs could not come to agree on a joint statement. Exceptionally, a couple among the few Israeli/Palestinian NGOs had advanced further and came up with an appeal, as follows:

We, the Palestinian and Israeli Members of the PCFF, Bereaved Families Supporting Reconciliation and Peace Make This Urgent Appeal; “IT WON’T STOP UNTIL WE TALK”.

To those who can make a difference to the daily reality of the Palestinian and Israeli people. To those who know that the negotiation of a cease fire is not enough and that it would only mean a temporary hiatus until the next round of killing. To those who understand that freedom of movement and the right to an independent and viable state for the Palestinian nation is a basic requisite for solving the conflict. To those who

understand that Israel's need for security is legitimate and that without it, no solution is possible. To those who care about both peoples. To those who only care about one side. We implore you to force all sides to sit around a table and find a way to stop the never ending cycle of violence so that finally we can live with a permanent sense of safety and dignity, which every nation deserves”.

I am one among those who have been through a lifetime committed to building bridges across the divide, and strongly believe that there is no military solution to our conflict. That the potential of nonviolent struggle for the oppressed –in this case the Palestinians- is very high. And even for those who are not pacifists, particularly after being exposed to such high level of violence, there could and should be an understanding that trying nonviolent action first is a wise alternative. We will continue to encourage such trend.

We know that you are concerned about us and our people and would very much appreciate effective world civil society solidarity. More concretely:

* THE IMMEDIATE PRIORITY IS NOT TO BE DIVERTED FROM THE URGENT NEED TO DEMAND THE CONTINUATION OF THE CEASEFIRE, FOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE. It will be important to address the representatives of the government of Israel (perhaps asking to meet with officials at the embassy in your country) and Hamas (there is an official political bureau in Damascus, and if we do not find the address, perhaps you could ask the Syrian embassy in your country or the Foreign Ministry in Damascus) to deliver the message

* To raise support and funds for the

continuation of the medical NGOs important relief work in Gaza, medicines and equipment to the wounded in the hospitals there and the individual treatment for those who need further attention in Israeli hospitals as well. Examples of such effective and committed action can be found in Physicians for Human Rights – Israel [<http://www.phr.org.il>].

* If we ever move again from "stopping the war" to "making peace", we need to the element of truth for future reconciliation. There will be a time, hopefully soon, when we should look back, investigate and make a clear statement about the responsibility involved in killing innocent civilians. Indiscriminately or purposely; combatants hiding into congested pockets of civilian population; targeted assassinations and "collateral damage"; the absence of safe-havens; the delay in medical relief and basic foodstuff; the functioning of humanitarian corridors and the freedom of movement of ambulances, and more.

We, concerned Israeli and Palestinian citizens, members of NGOs, should suggest the formation of a civil society Commission of Inquiry, with the participation of human rights, international law, humanitarian work experts and others, to assess the conduct of the Israel Defense Forces, a UN member state that has adhered to covenants and protocols. And to provide the full picture, even if Hamas is only a political/military organization and as such has not ratified such norms of behavior, we should also hold it accountable and consider their status as a quasi-government. Hence, to prevent impunity and the recurrence of such events in the future, we call upon the setting of an independent

Israeli/Palestinian commission of inquiry, formed by the best experts, assisted by other local, foreign and international non-governmental organizations. It is our duty to do it, and if we fail then the international community should step in." Your organization should call for such step.

We hope, work and pray that this long nightmare will never again be repeated. The sequels are to stay with us for long time, and will require the commitment of many more to bring us back to the pathways of peace. We want to march there, together. ←

THE NEED TO TRANSFORM MINDSETS

By Lucy Nusseibeh*

The recent massive Israeli attacks on Gaza have surely made a number of things clear. That violence will never solve the Israeli-Palestinian problem; and that there is need for a huge mental shift, away from not only the military/militaristic mindset that has faith in the power of violence to resolve problems and “win” in a political conflict, but also away from the callousness that this brings with it, and from the polarizing obsession with victimhood that it creates.

The military mindset and the counterproductive effect of violence

The Israelis, with one of the best-equipped, most sophisticated and well-trained armies in the world, with, according to eye-witness accounts, white phosphorus and DIME bombs that cause massive and painful injuries, have in the end declared a “unilateral cease-fire”. Despite killing over 1,300 Palestinians and destroying over 18,000 homes, they have not managed to provide themselves with the security they were seeking and which they so desperately need.

Hamas are still ruling Gaza and they can (and do) still fire rockets. Many Israelis believe that the army should have

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“finished the job” – whatever that sinister expression may be taken to mean. The rage created by the violence and destruction unleashed against the men women children and everything else in Gaza has also destroyed for most Palestinians the last vestiges of any hopes for peace and therewith the belief that it is worth making the effort to reach out to Israelis. This rage and despair must surely make the Israelis less secure.

As a result of the massive and indiscriminate use of force, both Israelis and Palestinians have less human security and the prospects for a political solution have almost completely been wiped out. Force/violence has not achieved its aims.

The militarism and belief in force permeate every aspect of the relationship between the Palestinians and Israelis. The vast influx of weapons and investments in armed security services among the Palestinians that were a key part of the peace agreements from 1994 onwards, have significantly raised the level of militarism and thereby the level of danger to all. Minds need to be demilitarized.

Israel is in control of the lives of the Palestinians in the insecure and unequal way in which the bully holding down his foe controls him, but is therefore unable to let him go out of fear of how he might retaliate. Both Palestinians and Israelis are locked in a system that is dominated by fear, victimhood, violence, and, for the majority, a striking lack of empathy.

While people in their tens of thousands across the world were able to identify with the agony of the Palestinians in Gaza, and were urging their governments to intervene to stop the attacks, polls showed that 94% of the Israeli people were in favour of the attacks. The remarks made by the

official Israeli spokespeople and government officials, emphasizing the suffering of the people of Sederot and Beer Sheva as if they were remotely comparable to the hell they were creating in Gaza – in fact as if it was more important - can only indicate a total dismissal of Palestinians as human beings. A scrap of empathy would have surely brought out tens of thousands of Israelis too demonstrating against the attacks.

The typical Israeli response to this is that there were showers of rockets coming out of Gaza making life unbearable for the inhabitants of the south of Israel; the Israelis had to attack Gaza for their security. It is true that there have been a great many rockets, and it is terrible that the inhabitants of southern Israel live in danger and fear from them.

The trouble with this response though, is that implies a parity of power and of the levels of danger and fear.

There is no such parity. Israel has total political and economic control, has overwhelming military superiority (F16s, Apache helicopters, Merkava tanks, the latest ordinance, versus home made rockets, no air power or sea power or tanks or even armored cars). The numbers of those killed both in the past weeks and in the past years, all are ample evidence of this. In addition to the fact that Israel controls the movement of all Palestinians, there are over 8,000 Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli jails, among them nearly 300 children under 18, and 48 elected members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. By contrast, there is one Israeli soldier kidnapped and held captive in Gaza.

A fifteen year old Palestinian girl died of fear after a week of the bombing of Gaza.

There is no comparison.

Just as violence is not conducive to peace, neither is fear, nor is victimhood.

So what is it that can allow say, an educated, otherwise sensitive, person to react so callously to the unmistakable killing of innocent people ? To their additional deprivations? To the denial of basic emergency care?

The misrepresentation of the conflict as a war between equals fuels the fears of the stronger party, the Israelis, as the dangers for them are exaggerated, and thereby encourages their dehumanization of the weaker party, the Palestinians. The levels of trauma in both societies lead to an overwhelming sense of victimhood, and again, high levels of fear.

Fear can be used to justify actions that would normally be considered morally reprehensible. A sense of victimhood tends to polarize and project the “other” as a monster, the embodiment of evil, and tends to make the victim, regardless of their actual actions, unable to acknowledge that they can ever be a perpetrator. Violent acts therefore cannot be perceived as such and therefore there is no perceived need for empathy.

Yet people in a conflict need to be encouraged to make every effort to maintain their human connectivity, even perhaps taught to consciously cultivate empathy in order precisely to overcome the dehumanizing and polarizing effects of the conflict and create a possible space for peace.

As the (increasingly cruel and terroristic) new wars target civilians more than soldiers, so does the demonization target the entire population and tend to dismiss the possibility of any “innocents”, so

that all become enemies and all casualties, and the need to promote empathy is even more imperative.

Where people are without empathy for others, including their enemies, this will ultimately return back and leave them without empathy from others and without empathy for themselves.

Reciprocity and dignity

The inequality permeates the attitudes too. Since the Israelis have the power over the Palestinians, there is no equality in attitude, nor any possibility of the reciprocity in relation to human dignity that is essential for sound human relations. Palestinians are humiliated in many ways by the Israelis, by their soldiers and by their institutions. This is a reflection of the power situation and therefore the Israelis are not humiliated by the Palestinians, just increasingly resented and hated. This can only therefore, make the Israelis less secure, as humiliation and deprivation will only lead to retaliation.

Human society is based on reciprocity, and reciprocity assumes that each human being has the same right to dignity and respect. If that fundamental right is destroyed, it is society itself that is destroyed. And those who deny the dignity of others destroy their own dignity and self-respect in the process. Without reciprocal respect there can be no security.

In this situation of almost total control, the more Israel tries to build its security on the insecurity of the Palestinians, the more insecure it in fact becomes.

Justice has to be applied evenly and war crimes cannot be ignored.

The need to rekindle our human connections

What is left for a way forward for peace? Who can talk to who? Is talk even worth anything any more when guns and bombs have become the chosen method of communication? The Palestinian problem is a political problem that needs a sustainable political solution, it is not fundamentally a humanitarian problem, though it has been compounded into becoming such by the Israeli occupation, increasingly over the years and especially these past few weeks. The problem will only go away if the Palestinians themselves go away (or perhaps die in sufficient numbers not to count any more) or else if there is a real solution that satisfies the national aspirations and the dignity of the Palestinians. Is there any point any more in talking about the latter option with the fraction of the 6% of Israelis that really are able to empathize with Palestinians? Or is this just empty talk, and just a form of self-indulgence and delusion? Is there any impact anyone can expect to have on the bigger picture any more?

For the few of us who still believe it is worth hoping for peace, and that a viable two-state solution can (at least with sufficient outside pressure) be achieved, and that it is still far more realistic than the “one-state option”, let us be creative in our approach to find ways to transform mindsets away from militarism and martyrdom. In this way maybe we can rekindle the innate human connections between the peoples who lived here for so many centuries in peace, reaffirm a dwindling faith in the possibility of a sustainable political solution for our communities, and start to transform the situation from war to peace. ←