

Aggression Under False Pretenses

By Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh

07/11/06 "Washington Post" -- -- GAZA, Palestine -- As Americans commemorated their annual celebration of independence from colonial occupation, rejoicing in their democratic institutions, we Palestinians were yet again besieged by our occupiers, who destroy our roads and buildings, our power stations and water plants, and who attack our very means of civil administration. Our homes and government offices are shelled, our parliamentarians taken prisoner and threatened with prosecution.

The current Gaza invasion is only the latest effort to destroy the results of fair and free elections held early this year. It is the explosive follow-up to a five-month campaign of economic and diplomatic warfare directed by the United States and Israel. The stated intention of that strategy was to force the average Palestinian to "reconsider" her vote when faced with deepening hardship; its failure was predictable, and the new overt military aggression and collective punishment are its logical fulfillment. The "kidnapped" Israeli Cpl. Gilad Shalit is only a pretext for a job scheduled months ago.

In addition to removing our democratically elected government, Israel wants to sow dissent among Palestinians by claiming that there is a serious leadership rivalry among us. I am compelled to dispel this notion definitively. The Palestinian leadership is firmly embedded in the concept of Islamic shura , or mutual consultation; suffice it to say that while we may have differing opinions, we are united in mutual respect and focused on the goal of serving our people. Furthermore, the invasion of Gaza and the kidnapping of our leaders and government officials are meant to undermine the recent accords reached between the government party and our brothers and sisters in Fatah and other factions, on achieving consensus for resolving the conflict. Yet Israeli collective punishment only strengthens our collective resolve to work together.

As I inspect the ruins of our infrastructure -- the largess of donor nations and international efforts all turned to rubble once more by F-16s and American-made missiles -- my thoughts again turn to the minds of Americans. What do they think of this?

They think, doubtless, of the hostage soldier, taken in battle -- yet thousands of Palestinians, including hundreds of women and children, remain in Israeli jails for resisting the illegal, ongoing occupation that is condemned by international law. They think of the pluck and "toughness" of Israel, "standing up" to "terrorists." Yet a nuclear Israel possesses the 13th-largest military force on the planet, one that is used to rule an area about the size of New Jersey and whose adversaries there have no conventional armed forces. Who is the underdog, supposedly America's traditional favorite, in this case?

I hope that Americans will give careful and well-informed thought to root causes and historical realities, in which case I think they will question why a supposedly "legitimate" state such as Israel has had to conduct decades of war against a subject refugee population without ever achieving its goals.

Israel's unilateral movements of the past year will not lead to peace. These acts -- the temporary withdrawal of forces from Gaza, the walling off of the West Bank -- are not strides toward resolution but empty, symbolic acts that fail to address the underlying conflict. Israel's nearly complete control over the lives of Palestinians is never in doubt, as confirmed by the humanitarian and economic suffering of the Palestinians since the January elections. Israel's ongoing policies of expansion, military control and assassination mock any notion of sovereignty or bilateralism. Its "separation barrier," running across our land, is hardly a good-faith gesture toward future coexistence.

But there is a remedy, and while it is not easy it is consistent with our long-held beliefs. Palestinian priorities include recognition of the core dispute over the land of historical Palestine and the rights of all its people; resolution of the refugee issue from 1948; reclaiming all lands occupied in 1967; and stopping Israeli attacks, assassinations and military expansion. Contrary to popular depictions of the crisis in the American media, the dispute is not only about Gaza and the West Bank; it is a wider national conflict that can be resolved only by addressing the full dimensions of Palestinian national rights in an integrated manner. This means statehood for the West Bank and Gaza, a capital in Arab East Jerusalem, and resolving the 1948 Palestinian refugee issue fairly, on the basis of international legitimacy and established law. Meaningful negotiations with a non-expansionist, law-abiding Israel can proceed only after this tremendous labor has begun.

Surely the American people grow weary of this folly, after 50 years and \$160 billion in taxpayer support for Israel's war-making capacity -- its "defense." Some Americans, I believe, must be asking themselves if all this blood and treasure could not have bought more tangible results for Palestine if only U.S. policies had been predicated from the start on historical truth, equity and justice.

However, we do not want to live on international welfare and American handouts. We want what Americans enjoy -- democratic rights, economic sovereignty and justice. We thought our pride in conducting the fairest elections in the Arab world might resonate with the United States and its citizens. Instead, our new government was met from the very beginning by acts of explicit, declared sabotage by the White House. Now this aggression continues against 3.9 million civilians living in the world's largest prison camps. America's complacency in the face of these war crimes is, as usual, embedded in the coded rhetorical green light: "Israel has a right to defend itself." Was Israel defending itself when it killed eight family members on a Gaza beach last month or three members of the Hajjaj family on Saturday, among them 6-year-old Rawan? I refuse to believe that such inhumanity sits well with the American public.

We present this clear message: If Israel will not allow Palestinians to live in peace, dignity and national integrity, Israelis themselves will not be able to enjoy those same rights. Meanwhile, our right to defend ourselves from occupying soldiers and aggression is a matter of law, as settled in the Fourth Geneva Convention. If Israel is prepared to negotiate seriously and fairly, and resolve the core 1948 issues, rather than the secondary ones from 1967, a fair and permanent peace is possible. Based on a hudna (comprehensive cessation of hostilities for an agreed time), the Holy Land still has an opportunity to be a peaceful and stable economic powerhouse for all the Semitic people of the region. If Americans only knew the truth, possibility might become reality.

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