

Letter from Palestine

Somewhere in Palestine, July 1— Morning came and we found that 90 of the nation's best men were captured by Israel from their homes in the night. Our mayor, who was released from four years in prison just a month ago. Someone for whom I have the utmost respect and admiration, as do his people here, political allies and opponents alike. And our vice mayor, too. The last time I talked with him, earlier this week, he was struggling a lot with chronic back pain. I wonder where they are now. If they have been fed today, or tortured. If they will sleep on beds tonight, or not at all. If they will be home tomorrow. If we will never see some of them again alive.

It's the first time Palestinians have captured an Israeli soldier in a long time; families of prisoners have begged the resistance not to release him until there is a prisoner exchange no matter what the consequences to the community—being well acquainted with the suffering that implies.

Everyone went about their business today, wedding processions in the streets, families eating icecream and watermelon in the sticky heat. Some with the heavy numb shock of loved ones vanished suddenly, shock without surprise; they expected that the price that has been paid, and paid, and paid, for keeping one's spirit from being broken, must be paid again. Myself, I couldn't keep from crying from time to time, although for me it is just a very small taste of the shock, seeing two good men that I know a little, powerful in their community with the power the community has entrusted them with, suddenly made helpless, pieces of meat for Israeli intelligence officers somewhere to enjoy, and knowing that if I knew them more, if I knew others, the sense of anger and sorrow and disbelief would be multiplied. I know that for the people around me these tears formed years and years ago. The anger and sorrow and loss and disbelief have happened too many times to count, but it does not diminish, to the world it is one more added to a large number, for each mother and sister and wife it is an unconsolable agony, an irreplaceable loss, an unimaginable theft, a violation of a family, a marriage, that might never be able to recover from the traumas and abuses that are being suffered, will be suffered in the days ahead.

Israel has over 10,000 Palestinian hostages, hundreds of them children, and slaughters Palestinians of any age on a daily basis. When Palestinians take 2 Israeli hostages and kill two soldiers, Israeli bombs Gaza. Bombs out the power stations, the water reticulation; no electricity, no water, bridges blasted severing cities from each other. Gaza Strip, the most densely populated area on earth on account of Israel using it as a specially designed human garbage can where refugees are disposed off and hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world. Brilliant, but unsuccessful. If you treat humans as garbage and they know that they are humans and not garbage, they will not quietly disappear. You will never sleep safe at night. You will never have the right to sleep safe at night. May you never sleep safe at night.

A young woman in my neighborhood asked, can you believe Israel kidnapped most of our government last night? Imagine waking up to hear that Palestinian forces had kidnapped 90 Israeli government leaders. It's hard to imagine that Israel would leave one house standing, one person uninjured.

Imagine if Palestinians had the military capacity to punish Israel on a comparable scale for every two hostages it takes and two it kills. Imagine if Americans, and Europeans, valued the blood of Palestinians and Iraqis as much as their own blood. Imagine if the nations of the world used their armies to protect the lives of the innocent and bring to justice thieving, raping, murdering states.

A couple days ago I sat with someone I know, who was taken hostage last night. He explained part of Hamas' interpretation of the Qur'an as follows: there are three kinds of people that Muslims have to deal with. 1) Those who treat you with respect. In this case, it is a crime against God to treat them with anything but respect, kindness, and hospitality. In other words, if a Jew wanted to immigrate to Palestine with full respect for the people here, wishing to become a member of Palestinian society, he should be welcomed. 2) Then there are those who do not respect you, and oppose you. You have no obligation to extend hospitality to them. 3) Then there are those who have no respect for your humanity, your property or your religion, they take power over your land and your lives, destroy your land and kill your people. In this case you have an obligation to fight against them to protect your land and your people. If they kill your people, you can kill their people.

Today I visited with another friend who thinks he may be captured tonight; so many of his friends were captured last night. He said, Israel doesn't care too much about the lives of the Israeli hostages, in the past there were cases

of them killing the hostages themselves by indiscriminate bombing of communities. But Israel has been waiting since Hamas' election for Hamas' first military operation, and so they knew this massive attack on the community would come, sooner or later. Even though different groups have participated in the Palestinian military operations in the past few days, all of Israel's targets are Hamas leaders. Israel wants to see Hamas destroyed, Europe and America want to see Hamas destroyed, and Abu Mazen seems to be trying his best to join them. Many of those arrested were among the Hamas members that Israel exiled to the no mans land between Israel and Lebanon, a decade ago.

He told me some of his friend's stories from those three terrible years, living in tents through snowy winters. He talked about the warm spirit that thrived in the tents during freezing months. He told of how hungry men went to an apricot orchard and couldn't find the owner, so they took some fruit and then tied some money in a handkerchief to the tree. When the owner found it, he tracked them down, and said to them, with tears coming down his face, what kind of men are you, starving and rejected by the world, who have such principles that you will not even take fruit that you find on a tree. I give you my fruit, I give you my orchards!

I felt the poverty of being from the West, where the media can say nothing about these men except to endlessly regurgitate simpleminded slander... of those captured I know just a few names, and little of their stories. For anyone here, each of these names represents a rich story, decades of struggles, of suffering, heroism, years of prison, of pain, of courage, of trying again, of hopes betrayed, of disappointment and endurance that continues forward to find new hope. We had this conversation over lunch in his daughter's home. She and her husband were active with Hamas and he was seized by Israel and killed in prison, leaving her with their three small children. Don't forget, it is America that gives Israel everything it needs to do this to us, she said. When we left, she and her three boys kissed him over and over, not knowing if tomorrow they will wake up to hear that her dad, their grandpa, has become a prisoner.

This week I spent with a French student, an orphan of war in Bangladesh, who is doing research on women's views of dignity. Dignity is a word thrown around a lot in international law but without definition; people have a "right to dignity" but since no one knows what it is, when it comes right down to it violations of this right cannot be prosecuted. I helped her interview dozens of women this week, from Fatah, Hamas, PFLP, poor and wealthy, educated and illiterate, young and old. We would sit down with strangers and as soon as dignity, *al karame*, was mentioned, the room burst into life with passionate opinions, terrible stories, and incredibly brave and inspiring statements. Here are some of the things I heard about dignity.

There is no dignity in Palestine; we face humiliation at checkpoints, restriction from visiting our families or going to school, soldiers in our homes during the night, prison... Israel's war is first of all against our dignity which Israel attacks from every angle and with every means possible, because if it can succeed in destroying our dignity, we will not be able to resist anymore. There is tremendous dignity in Palestine; perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, because the occupation with all its mechanisms for humiliation makes us aware of our dignity; the more they try to destroy our dignity the stronger our dignity becomes; they are getting the opposite results that they want. There are two kinds of dignity: one that you get from others, when you are treated with dignity, the other comes from inside of you, from what you know about who you really are before God, and no one has the power to take this away from you unless you let them. Even if as women we are captured by Israel, stripped naked and raped in the prisons, if we resist every attack upon our dignity it will not be lost. A woman was told at a checkpoint to remove her scarf. She refused, and the soldier

showed her a metal rod and said he would drive it through her eyes if she did not take it off. You can have your eyes, or you can have your dignity. She refused. He drove it through her eyes. She survived, but she is blind. And she did not lose her dignity. A friend of the Prophet Mohammad, a woman, was tied to the ground by a man who made her choose between her dignity or her life. The only thing she was able to do was to spit in his face, and she did. He killed her. But he did not destroy her dignity.

Arab people have a great source of dignity from the rich and deep history of our culture. But now all Arab lands are captive and only in Iraq and Palestine are we free within ourselves, because we do not accept the enslavement that is forced upon us; our resistance gives us great dignity.

We get our dignity from our land. It is our life. As long as we are in our land, no matter how much we suffer, we will have our dignity. If they succeed in expelling us to Jordan, our dignity will be lost forever. I have my family's olive trees. Every year I used to have precious olive oil from my own trees that I could give generously to my friends and neighbors. Now Israel has killed half of my trees and imprisoned the rest. These trees are like my own children. It is a terrible, terrible sorrow and shame for me each day to know that I am powerless to help them. Now, when we need olive oil for ourselves, we have to go to the store and buy it. But I was one who could generously give olive oil to my friends and relatives.

We get our dignity from Islam, as women, and as human beings. In our culture, before Islam, women were just seen as property, baby girls could be buried alive. We see women in many parts of the world who have no dignity. Islam has given us our full rights as women in every sense, and full equality with every other human being. In the Qur'an God says that he has given the same dignity to every human being—it does not depend on whether you are male or female, or whether you are Muslim or from another religion, each of us has the same worth.

What do you expect and hope for in the future?

Things will get much, much worse. It is written that we will suffer like this until near the end.

Our hope comes from knowing that Jesus will come back and will remove all injustice from the earth, and at last the race of mankind will be free to live in peace and equality.

What do you believe should be the political outcome for Palestine?

If only they would all go back where they came from, we could live in peace in our homes and land again.

We can never live with them; if someone has killed your children, can you accept them as a neighbor?

We already live with them, of course we can in the future.

We cannot live with them, we must have a state, and they must have a state. About all the refugees who have their homes and lands in Israel, I don't know.....

We can live with them in one state, the refugees must be given back their homes and their land.

If we have an Islamic state on all of Palestine, it is the only way we will be able to live together, us and them, because Islam is the only system where equality between people of different religions is protected

Do you think negotiations or armed struggle is the best strategy at this time?

Of course, if we could get our rights back without violence, that would be the best way. If negotiations ever worked, then we should use that instead of armed struggle, but they have never produced anything. We have to keep fighting to protect our land and our community. How could it be right to do nothing when daily they are attacking

our lives and our land?

As a woman would you participate in armed struggle?

I admire women who do, but I myself don't think I'm capable of it. My contribution is to study and be a good mother to my children.

No, I don't think women should carry weapons.

Yes! It would be a great honor to fight for my country!

Yes! How I wish we had the chance to be trained as soldiers like all the Israeli women are. I am not married yet, but I hope that one day I will have a son who will give his life for our country to be free. The Americans, Europeans and Israelis place more value on the blood of their dogs and cats than they do on the blood of Palestinians. None of us can ever forget the sight of little Huda screaming for her father on the beach of Gaza, throwing herself on the sand next to his dead body over and over. No one in the world has expressed their outrage, or even sorrow, to us about these atrocities against us. They care deeply about the *Mundial*, and Huda's agony is an interruption, a distraction, from the soccer score. Our blood is so, so cheap to the world, and Israeli blood is so valuable. They do not see our humanity at all.

How do you find your sense of your own humanity, when all the world is telling you your life, your death, your blood is worthless?

When it comes down to that, we know that God sees us, even if we are suffering in an Israeli torture chamber and no one in our family knows if where we are or if we are alive or dead, we know that God sees us and knows our value, our humanity. We belong to him, and in that is our worth, and our hope, our fates are in his hands and our lives are very precious to him, no matter how worthless they are to our brothers and sisters in the human race, and in the end, that is what matters. We know who we are. Our lives, our deaths, our suffering, our hopes, our disappointment, are not insignificant. Yesterday I met a new appointee from the German government in Jerusalem, a young guy with an American accent. He was happy that Hamas and Fatah had agreed on the Prisoners' Document. Great, we've gotten Hamas to recognize Israel, he said. Now we just have to get them to renounce armed struggle, and then get rid of these ideas of an Islamic state. The problem is when we bring democracy to the middle east, we always have to deal with the challenge of making sure there is a secular state when so many people want an Islamic state. (Jewish states, apparently, are just dandy.) What these Palestinians just don't understand, he said, is that armed struggle won't get them anywhere. Haven't they learned anything, after all these years? It's really hurting their image in the international community. Well, I said sarcastically, since you understand this so well, and none of the Palestinians have been able to grasp it, maybe you should explain it to them then. Oh, I am, every Palestinian I meet, he said with sincerity.

And what is that dazzling offer that Europe will extend, if Palestinians promise to sit on their hands and open their mouths? In exchange for your dignity, what? Maybe longlife, lifelong food rations? Maybe the chance to clean toilets in Israel, and the dream that your grandchildren could do the same?

I have not been here too long, but it is long enough to be sure of one thing: It is the Europeans, the Israelis, and the Americans who fail to grasp the central truth, after all these decades of trying to finetune the catastrophe they have engineered in Palestine: these women and men and children, who carry their heads so high, know who they are. They are prepared to sacrifice their lives, but they are not prepared to sacrifice their dignity. While the world discusses the moral or strategic aspects of armed resistance, there is no confusion about these issues here. Undefined, dignity—and the land—would be lost, and death would be better. With or without your permission, they will continue to fight.

this letter was received by NECDP, New England Committee to Defend Palestine