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Breaking the Gaza siege *The courage and determination of one small group who refuse to stand by and watch Gaza starve is a lesson to us all*

Ghada Karmi*

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August 14, 2008

During a conference in California in May of this year I was surprised to receive an invitation from two American activists to join their group, the Free Gaza Movement, on a boat trip to Gaza in August. They spoke of their determination to break the inhuman Israeli siege of Gaza by facing it head on. They would sail directly to Gaza's shores in boats laden with humanitarian supplies. At the time I thought them well meaning but unrealistic, even naïve, and I was sceptical about the success of their enterprise. I thought it unlikely it would ever take off, and an Israeli colleague, also invited, judged the Israeli navy would turn them back as soon as they sailed anywhere near to Gaza's shores.

I could not have been more mistaken. Undeterred by our hints of problems they might encounter, these determined people pressed on vigorously with their preparations over the months, and this week they set sail in several boats as planned from Cyprus to Gaza. All are unarmed volunteers, some 60 people from 17 countries, amongst whom is an 81-year-old nun and an 83-year old Holocaust survivor, as well as journalists, human rights activists, religious leaders and others. Tony Blair's sister-in-law, Lauren Booth, is one of them, determined to go where Blair, Middle East special envoy and peacemaker since 2007, has still not dared to penetrate. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Carter Center have both given the project their support. What risks the volunteers are taking and what dangers are ahead, we do not yet know. But even if this brave fleet of boats is forced to turn back and never reaches Gaza, the enterprise will be a monument to human decency and compassion that few of the apathetic millions who watch Gaza's tragedy from afar have shown.

The point that struck me most forcibly about this mission was that its organisers were non- Arabs. Filled with revulsion at the Warsaw Ghetto Israel has created in Gaza, they told me they felt driven to act. But this ghetto is Arab and sits in Arab land. So where were the Arab activists in this? Why was this not one of many Arab- organised attempts at breaking Gaza's siege? Where was the Arab refusal to stand by in the face of such oppression and injustice? The plight of Gaza almost beggars belief in its horror, a man-made catastrophe of starving people and malnourished children, without adequate fuel, electricity or medicines. All these depredations are well documented by humanitarian organisations, the United Nations and numerous eyewitnesses. President Jimmy Carter, quoted in The Guardian newspaper 8 May, summed it up: "The world is witnessing a terrible human rights crime in Gaza, where a million and a half human beings are being imprisoned with almost no access to the outside world. An entire population is being brutally punished."

:: What happened in Kurdish Halabja?

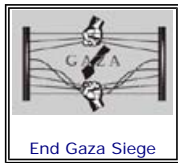


:: Lettera del Presidente Saddam Hussein al popolo americano
:: Letter from President Saddam Hussein to the American People



:: Lynching Saddam by Gabriele Zamparini

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:: Autodeterminazione e

resistenza irakena

di Aldo Bernardini,
Ordinario di Diritto
internazionale
all'Università di
Teramo

:: ONU - XX
Assemblea Generale
(1965):

La XX Assemblea
Generale dell'ONU
(1965) dichiara "la
legittimità della lotta
da parte dei popoli
sotto oppressione
coloniale, per
esercitare il loro
diritto all' autoder-
minazione e
all'indipendenza".
Inoltre, l'Assemblea
invita "tutti gli Stati a
fornire assistenza
morale e materiale ai
movimenti di
liberazione nazionale
nei territori coloniali".

:: ONU - Risoluzione
1514

"L'Assemblea
Generale dichiara
che: la soggezione
dei popoli a dominio
straniero, conquista e
asservimento
costituisce una
negazione dei diritti
umani fondamentali,
è contraria alla Carta
delle Nazioni Unite ed
è un impedimento
alla promozione della
pace e della
cooperazione
mondiali.

Tutti i popoli hanno
diritto all' autoder-
minazione: in virtù di
tale diritto essi
devono liberamente
determinare il loro
status politico e
liberamente
perseguire il loro
sviluppo economico,
sociale e culturale".

:: Convenzione di
Ginevra, Protocollo
Addizionale I (1977):

La lotta armata può
essere usata, come
ultima risorsa, come
mezzo per esercitare
il diritto all'
autoder-
minazione.

:: Tribunale penale
internazionale

In base allo Statuto
del Tribunale penale
internazionale, sono
definiti "crimini di
guerra":

(1) attacchi lanciati
intenzionalmente
contro popolazione
civili in quanto tali o
contro civili che non
prendano
direttamente parte
alle ostilità;
(4) attacchi lanciati
intenzionalmente
nella consapevolezza
che gli stessi avranno
come conseguenza la
perdita di vite umane
tra la popolazione
civile, e lesioni a civili
o danni a proprietà
civili ovvero danni
diffusi duraturi e
gravi all'ambiente

No one can deny Israel's signal role in creating this tragedy, nor the deplorable complicity of the US and its European partners in maintaining it. But we need to recognise the Arab role also in this victimisation of Gaza's people. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the Rafah crossing. Gaza's borders have been controlled by Israel for over 40 years. In June 2007, Israel sealed these borders almost completely. Soon after, it reduced humanitarian aid entering Gaza to a minimum and then cut off fuel and energy supplies to the Strip. The only window onto the outside world for the besieged Gazans opened through Rafah into Egypt, a fellow Arab country where surely they would find relief. Or so one might believe.

Following Israel's evacuation of its settlements from Gaza in 2005, a peculiar regime over the operation of the Rafah crossing was agreed whereby Egypt and the Palestinian Authority would control exit and entry. European representatives would monitor the crossing, coordinating with Israel, which had the power of veto over goods and people passing through. The Palestinian side tolerated this absurd and intrusive surveillance to attain some freedom of movement. This, however, never happened. The Rafah crossing is closed most of the time and when the Gazans in January this year, driven beyond endurance, broke through the wall shutting them off from Egypt, the latter quickly re-built it.

People and goods are routinely held up on both sides of the border. In the last two weeks, a consignment of 1.5 tonnes of medicines donated to Gaza by the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign -- an organisation with modest means -- has been stuck at Rafah, denied entry by the Egyptian authorities, despite Scottish entreaties from parliamentarians and others. Earlier this month, five Palestinians were killed when Egyptian authorities blew up a tunnel under the border that they were using to smuggle supplies into Gaza. Though it is alleged that such tunnels are used for arms smuggling, the major traffic through them are ordinary provisions. Cutting those channels amounts to cutting any connection Gazans have with the outside world.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Arab world looks on, unable or unwilling to help the people of Gaza. Arab communities in the Diaspora are little better. They make charitable donations or support aid agencies, and talk about the tragedy of Gaza. But none has taken the bold and fearless action this emergency needs. Much has been written and said about Arab inertia in the face of blatant injustice, often at the hands of dictatorial regimes. Yet this cannot explain or justify the Arab position on Gaza. This should have been the rallying point for all Arabs to unite in rejection of a vicious punishment unjustly imposed on an innocent people. It could have been the first move to reinstate Palestine's cause to where it had been, at the heart of the Arab world. Not one, but a fleet of Arab ships should have visited Gaza daily to break the siege. It is an indictment of us all that it took a foreign crew and foreign volunteers to breach the walls of Gaza's prison and defy its cruel jailers.

* The writer is a professor at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, and author of Married to Another Man: Israel's Dilemma in Palestine .

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L'Impero si è fermato a Baghdad, by Valeria Poletti

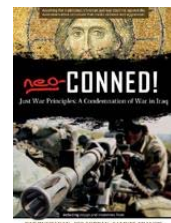
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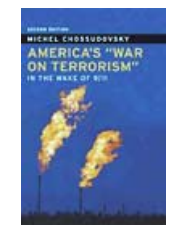
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"Neconned" and "Neconned Again", two new collections of essays



America's "War on Terrorism", book by Michel Chossudovsky

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