

Gaza massacres must spur us to action

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"I will play music and celebrate what the Israeli air force is doing." Those were the words, spoken on Al Jazeera today by Ofer Shmerling, an Israeli civil defense official in the Sderot area adjacent to Gaza, as images of Israel's latest massacres were broadcast around the world.

A short time earlier, US-supplied Israeli F-16 warplanes and Apache helicopters dropped over 100 bombs on dozens of locations in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip killing at least 195 persons and injuring hundreds more. Many of these locations were police stations located, like police stations the world over, in the middle of civilian areas. The US government was one of the first to offer its support for Israel's attacks, and others will follow.

Reports said that many of the dead were Palestinian police officers. Among those Israel labels "terrorists" were more than a dozen traffic police officers undergoing training. An as yet unknown number of civilians were killed and injured; Al Jazeera showed images of several dead children, and the Israeli attacks came at the time thousands of Palestinian children were in the streets on their way home from school.

Shmerling's joy has been echoed by Israelis and their supporters around the world; their violence is righteous violence. It is "self-defense" against "terrorists" and therefore justified. Israeli bombing -- like American and NATO bombing in Iraq and Afghanistan -- is bombing for freedom, peace and democracy.

The rationalization for Israel's massacres, already being faithfully transmitted by the English-language media, is that Israel is acting in "retaliation" for Palestinian rockets fired with increasing intensity ever since the six-month truce expired on 19 December (until today, no Israeli had been killed or injured by these recent rockets attacks).

But today's horrific attacks mark only a change in Israel's method of killing Palestinians recently. In recent months they died mostly silent deaths, the elderly and sick especially, deprived of food and necessary medicine by the two year-old Israeli blockade calculated and intended to cause suffering and deprivation to 1.5 million Palestinians, the vast majority refugees and children, caged into the Gaza Strip. In Gaza, Palestinians died silently, for want of basic medications: insulin, cancer treatment, products for dialysis prohibited from reaching them by Israel.

What the media never question is Israel's idea of a truce. It is very simple. Under an Israeli-style truce, Palestinians have the right to remain silent while Israel starves them, kills them and continues to violently colonize their land. Israel has not only banned food and medicine to sustain Palestinian bodies in Gaza but it is also intent on starving minds: due to the blockade, there is not even ink, paper and glue to print textbooks for schoolchildren.

As John Ging, the head of operations of the United Nations agency for Palestine refugees (UNRWA), told The Electronic Intifada in November: "there was five months of a ceasefire in the last couple of months, where the people of Gaza did not benefit; they did not have any restoration of a dignified existence. We in fact at the UN, our supplies were also restricted during the period of the ceasefire, to the point where we were left in a very vulnerable and precarious position and with a few days of closure we ran out of food."

That is an Israeli truce. Any response to Israeli attacks – whether peaceful protests against the apartheid wall in Bilin and Nilin in the West Bank is met with bullets and bombs. There are no rockets launched at Israel from the West Bank, and yet Israel's attacks, killings, land theft, settler pogroms and kidnappings never ceased for one single day during the truce. The Palestinian Authority in Ramallah has acceded to all of Israel's demands, even assembling "security forces" to fight the resistance on Israel's behalf. None of that has spared a single Palestinian or her property or livelihood from Israel's relentless violent colonization. It did not save, for instance, the al-Kurd family from seeing their home of 50 years in occupied East Jerusalem demolished on 9 November, so the land it sits on could be taken by settlers.

Once again we are watching massacres in Gaza, as we did last March when 110 Palestinians, including dozens of children, were killed by Israel in just a few days. Once again people everywhere feel rage, anger and despair that this outlaw state carries out such crimes with impunity.

But all over the Arab media and internet today the rage being expressed is not directed solely at Israel. Notably, it is directed more sharply than ever at Arab states. The images that stick are of Israel's foreign minister Tzipi Livni in Cairo on Christmas day. There she sat smiling with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Then there are the pictures of Livni and Egypt's foreign minister smiling and slapping their palms together.

The Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported today that last Wednesday the Israeli "cabinet authorized the prime minister, the defense minister, and the foreign minister to determine the timing and the method" of Israel's attacks on Gaza. Everywhere people ask, what did Livni tell the Egyptians and more importantly what did they tell her? Did Israel get a green light to turn Gaza's streets red once again? Few are ready to give Egypt the benefit of the doubt after it has helped Israel besiege Gaza by keeping the Rafah border crossing closed for more than a year.

On top of the intense anger and sadness so many people feel at Israel's renewed mass killings in Gaza is a sense of frustration that there seem to be so few ways to channel it into a political response that can change the course of events, end the suffering, and bring justice.

But there are ways, and this is a moment to focus on them. Already I have received notices of demonstrations and solidarity actions being planned in cities all over the world. That is important. But what will happen after the demonstrations disperse and the anger dies down? Will we continue to let Palestinians in Gaza die in silence?

Palestinians everywhere are asking for solidarity, real solidarity, in the form of sustained, determined political action. The Gaza-based One Democratic State Group reaffirmed this today as it "called upon all civil society organizations and freedom loving people to act immediately in any possible way to put pressure on their governments to end diplomatic ties with Apartheid Israel and institute sanctions against it."

The global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement for Palestine (<http://www.bdsmovement.net/>) provides the framework for this. Now is the time to channel our raw emotions into a long-term commitment to make sure we do not wake up to "another Gaza" ever again.

Co-founder of The Electronic Intifada, Ali Abunimah is author of One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse (Metropolitan Books, 2006).