

Besieged Cities: People as Hostages of War

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Israel: Hostage to its Own Military Power

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I would like to start by telling a story, one that took place about 20 years ago in Jerusalem. I was invited to dinner at a friend's home, together with several people I did not know. The wine and food were good, the conversation was good, and at some point, I turned to the woman next to me and asked: "Rita, where are you from?" "I'm from Ramallah," she said. "No, I mean, before Ramallah, where are you from?" How could this beautiful and cultured woman come from Ramallah, I thought. "I'm Palestinian," said Rita, "I come from Ramallah." "But that's impossible," I said without thinking, "if you were Palestinian, you would not be sitting and talking to me. The Palestinians want to push Israel into the sea." "Well, as it happens," said Rita, "the Palestinian National Council just officially recognized Israel and wants a two-state solution, with Israel and Palestine living side by side." I heard this, but could not believe it. "That's not true," I said to her, "If it were true, I would have heard about it on the Israeli media." "Oh, but your news is censored," said Rita, "Israel has strict censorship." Her words shocked me. I had not known about our censorship. I left Rita and that night I began my real education about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It turned out that there was a lot I had not known.

There are two things I would like you to notice about this story.

First, I was 42 years old before I met a Palestinian for the first time for a real conversation. Oh, I had spoken to Palestinians - cleaning ladies, gardeners, storekeepers on the Palestinian side of Jerusalem. But I had never before spoken to a Palestinian who was like me - educated, well-traveled, liked the same books... That's because even though Israel dominates the lives of Palestinians through the occupation, there is complete segregation between us. We don't go to the same schools, we don't meet at work, we don't eat at the same restaurants, and, well, we don't go to the same dinner parties. In fact, 20 years after that story took

place, the segregation is much worse: Today, I would not be allowed to enter Ramallah, and Rita would not be allowed to enter Jerusalem. This separation plays a big role in the stereotypes we have about each other - the fear and prejudice, my racist belief that a beautiful and cultured woman could not be Palestinian. In reading about the history of Zaragoza before I came here, I learned about your own experience with segregation in the Middle Ages, and the intolerance that it fosters.

A second thing to notice is the censorship. At the time I met Rita, Israeli radio news was ordered by the government never to mention the name of the PLO - the Palestinian Liberation Organization - or of its leader, Yasser Arafat, in the belief that they were terrorists, and terrorists should not be given publicity. Therefore, when the Palestinian National Council voted in 1988 to declare a state, reject terrorism, and implicitly recognize Israel's right to exist - we Israeli citizens were told nothing about it.

But some things have changed since my very first dinner with a Palestinian. They have changed in me, and they have changed in the State of Israel.

Let me talk about changes in Israel.

The founding of Israel in 1948 happened as a result of centuries of anti-Semitism, primarily in Europe. Palestine was viewed as a refuge, a shelter, somewhere Jews could go when they were persecuted as Jews. The Holocaust speeded up this process, and the State of Israel was founded to provide a safe haven for Jews fleeing anti-Semitism. One of the promises the founders made to themselves and the world was that Israel (quote) "will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel" (unquote). Those are the words of our Declaration of Independence in Israel. In fact, those of you who are old enough to remember the birth of Israel in 1948 probably also remember that in those years, Israel was cherished by the leftists of the world, as Israel was created by a persecuted minority and promised to fulfill a beautiful vision of a democratic and just society in the Middle East - the first such democracy in the region.

What everyone seemed to disregard in those years - even the leftists - was that Israel was created in a region where other people, non-Jews, were

already living, and that the celebrated victory of Israel came at the price of the defeat and exile of Arabs who were already there. But the surrounding Arab countries did not ignore this, and the conflict between the Jews and Arabs - a conflict that had been smoldering ever since European Jews first immigrated to the region in the late 1800s - this conflict now broke out into open warfare.

So Israel, which had promised itself and the world to become the cradle of democracy in the Middle East, now began to arm itself and train to be fighters, importing weapons from other countries and then manufacturing its own. The political leaders of Israel began to develop a new narrative to replace the narrative of persecution and victimhood. This new narrative was about strength, self-defense, being a victim no longer. The phrase "Never again" - with its allusion to the Holocaust - became the slogan of the new Israeli: A people who will "never again" allow themselves to be a victim. Israel's belief in the importance of military power was only reinforced by the hostility of the neighboring Arab countries, and by its fear that the State of Israel could be erased the very first time it lost at war. So Israel's decision to become invincible - undefeatable - was rooted in objective reality as well as historical fears.

I will not give you a history of Israel's wars, but let me just list them, because you get a sense of how much warfare there has been in the brief 60 years of Israel's life:

- ← In 1956 - the Suez Campaign against Egypt.
- ← Twelve years later, the Six Day War against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.
- ← Six years later, the Yom Kippur War against Egypt and Syria.
- ← Nine years later, the first Lebanon War, which lasted 17 years.
- ← There were two Intifadas - uprisings - as Palestinians strove for freedom from the occupation. Each Intifada lasted several years.
- ← In between the Intifadas, Iraq shot missiles into Israel during the first Gulf War, although (thank goodness), Israel did not return the fire.
- ← Just two and a half years ago, Israel launched the Second Lebanon War.
- ← And finally - well, probably not finally - Israel just conducted a devastating attack on Gaza in response to rockets fired by Hamas.

This is an incredible amount of warfare in a very short period. I count 9 different wars or military “operations” as the generals call them - as if they are operations to fix our health - over the last 60 years.

Now there is something drastically wrong with this kind of history, even without examining questions like “Who started it?”, “Were these wars justified?”, “Were they self-defense or not?”. Whatever the answers to these questions, clearly Israel is engaged in constant warfare, paying more attention to sharpening its military prowess than to strengthening its commitment to a just and democratic society. Whether these are wars of choice or necessity, aggression or self-defense, Israel has become a warlike and heavily militarized society.

Perhaps you can imagine some of the effects this has had on our society:

- Boys who dream about growing up to become fighter pilots, not doctors;
- Young women who are encouraged to have many children to fuel the “demographic war” - the race to have more Israeli children than Palestinian children;
- Increased domestic violence, as soldiers transfer aggressive modes of behavior from the battlefield to the home;
- Racism against Arab citizens of Israel - they are 20% of our population - because many Jewish Israelis now think of all Arabs as the enemy.

And there are more prices to pay as a result of being continually engaged in war. The constant waging of war deepens poverty, as Israel sinks vast resources into weapons, maintaining the occupation, and building the illegal settlements (colonies) at the expense of social programs inside Israel - housing, education, health, caring for the elderly, and other needs. All these important social issues become marginalized when a society is at war.

The ongoing conflict also heightens inequality between men and women. In a society at war - where it is predominantly the men who are risking their lives and making military and political decisions - men and their views become valued and privileged over women and our views. This entrenches inequality for women, leaving us at a disadvantage in competing for jobs, political office, and social status. A man who has been an officer in

the army or served in a combat role has an advantage over a woman in applying for a job. And let's not forget all the generals who parachuted out of the army directly into senior elective office, including several prime ministers - Yitzhak Rabin, Arik Sharon, and Ehud Barak, for example - all former generals.

Although Israel's original goal was to become the "Athens" of the Middle East, instead, we have become "Sparta" - living by the sword, honoring our warriors, withholding our natural human compassion for those who suffer.

The recent war in Gaza is a horrifying example of this: 1,300 Palestinians killed, among them 400 children, over 5,000 wounded, more than 100,000 people without a roof over their heads. Israelis justified this devastation as self-defense - to end the rocket fire from Gaza into Israel. But what about the civilians killed? The children? Where is compassion? Where is adherence to international humanitarian law, particularly the Fourth Geneva Convention, intended to protect civilians during times of war?

On the day the news reached Israel that a Spanish court was opening a criminal investigation into 7 Israelis who were involved in the assassination in 2002 of Shehade, a Hamas militant, the politicians in Israel were furious: Our Defense Minister Barak said, "Calling the assassination of a terrorist a 'crime against humanity' is living in an upside-down world." He did not mention that 14 innocent people were killed at the same time, more than half of them children, or that 50 innocent people were wounded by the bomb. The head of the air force who ordered the killing said that he (quote) "feels nothing" when he releases such a bomb. I did not hear a single Israeli official say that it may have been a misjudgment to drop a one-ton bomb on an apartment building in order to execute one man.

During the recent Gaza War, I heard no one in Israel except human rights and peace groups denounce the indiscriminate killing of civilians, the bombing of schools, the brutality of phosphorous bombs. Two years after the Lebanon War, there is still no broad condemnation of Israel's use of cluster bombs or land mines. While I understand that one's senses may be

dulled during a war, enough time has passed for Israelis to assess and reject the cruelty of these weapons. But I do not hear it.

Israel's brutality toward Palestinians under occupation is also not discussed - the killing, wounding, torture with its physical and emotional traumas, homes destroyed, olive trees uprooted, land stolen, movement restricted, families separated from their schools, hospitals, loved ones, and on top of this, a cruel siege that prevents Gazans from living normal lives - all this has been met by a cold heart of most of my fellow Israelis.

The media in Israel do not help open our hearts or minds. During the Gaza War, one could find very few reports on the Israeli news about the harm caused to Palestinians, and very little criticism of Israel's conduct of the war. Indeed, the government actually blocked all journalists from entering Gaza to see what was happening there. This censorship was directed against Israeli and international media alike, but criticism of the censorship came primarily from international journalists. During times of peace, one can hear alternative views in the media, but not during times of war.

Protest in Israel was similarly suppressed during the Gaza war, and this is a relatively new phenomenon in Israel. Hundreds of Israelis were jailed for demonstrating against the war. Many of these were Israeli Arabs who also carried flags of Palestine, but not all. Many were Israeli Jews who were standing on street corners with pacifist signs that said "Ceasefire Now!" or "Stop the Killing!". When Israel is not at war, dissent is tolerated. During war - and that happens very often in Israel, let's not forget - dissent is considered subversive, disloyal.

I know that I am drawing a terrible picture of my country. But Israel - once the small, cultured nation working hard to live up to its own dream of a just society - has fallen hostage to its own fear and its own power. Having once been besieged ourselves, we see no way to protect ourselves than to besiege others. We are no longer the weak victim; now we are the neighborhood bully. Israel has the strongest army in the Middle East; we are among the largest exporters of arms to the world, especially to militias and juntas that cannot purchase their weapons openly; Israelis train armed

forces all over the world, not all of them reputable. Israel is one of only 9 countries with nuclear arms, and the government runs a top-secret facility for chemical and biological warfare. Is this the country envisioned by the founding fathers and mothers, the victims of the Holocaust who wanted to show the world that Israel can become not just a refuge for victims, but also a pearl of justice and democracy in the Middle East?

We have come a long way from our roots and our dreams.

But this is not the end of the story. It is not the end because there are many people in Israel who are deeply worried about these phenomena. I am part of a movement of Israelis who want to change these anti-democratic trends, who advocate for peace and human rights with our Arab neighbors, and who work for justice inside Israel for all its citizens, Jewish and Arab alike.

We are not a large group, but diverse, loud, and - if I may say so - also brave. There are groups whose names you may know - Gush Shalom, Yesh Gvul, and Rabbis for Human Rights - who work to end the Israeli occupation and build a culture of peace. Among the human rights organizations, I will mention B'Tselem, which seeks to protect the human rights of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, and Physicians for Human Rights.

These are only a few of the Israeli groups that work for peace. There is no time to talk about them all, but I would like to say a few words about the women's peace movement in Israel, which has been at the forefront of peacemaking. In 1988 women in Israel founded the movement now known as Women in Black. Dressed in black to mourn the victims on both sides, Women in Black has maintained a one-hour vigil every single Friday for the past 21 years, in which women hold signs demanding an end to the Israeli occupation. Women in Black vigils now exist in many countries, some focused on other wars and occupations. Spain has a wonderful and strong movement of Women in Black, which hosted our international conference in Valencia two years ago.

In Israel, the women's peace movement includes Bat Shalom, which engages in political dialogue with Palestinian women. It includes New

Profile, women who support the 18 year-olds who refuse to do army service, and are sent to prison. It includes Machsom Watch, women who are standing at military checkpoints by 6 o'clock in the morning, to make sure that Palestinians will be allowed to cross, despite the harsh restrictions. These and other groups, joined together in the Coalition of Women for Peace, are united in a relentless effort to bring the bloodshed to an end.

The women's organizations in the peace movement engage in a wide variety of activities. We help Palestinian families with the olive harvest, and provide school supplies to Palestinian youngsters. We take Israelis on "tours" of the Occupied Territories so they can see what's really happening. We run public education campaigns. We engage in Gandhi-inspired direct action - we once "lay siege" to the Israeli Ministry of Defense, in an effort to get them to understand the cruelty of this tactic. Our siege, of course, didn't last as long as the terrible siege now choking Gaza. We have blocked bulldozers with our bodies, chained ourselves to olive trees, and confronted soldiers in efforts to prevent the destruction of Palestinian homes. Much joint work has also been done together with Palestinian women. Some of our actions have ended in arrests or injury. If peace could be won by effort alone, the women's peace movement would have achieved it long ago.

Let me also mention one more aspect of the women's peace movement: We advocate that women must be equal partners in the negotiations for peace, giving full support to *UN Security Council Resolution 1325*. Women must become part of the negotiations because this is only fair and just, and because agreements must reflect the needs of all those affected by them, not just the men. Therefore the input of women is critical. We also point out that women are more likely to come up with a decent peace agreement, one that is considered a win-win situation for both sides. Indeed, it defies logic to appoint military men as negotiators - generals who are trained to measure their success by the unconditional surrender of the other. I believe that any mother would have more experience in the art of resolving conflict amicably.

But the true greatness of the Israeli peace movement is not its courage in defying the authorities, but in holding up a vision that goes

beyond the end of fighting. It is not only that Israel must break the cycle of violence, but that Israel must engage in a deep-seated change of priorities. This means not just ending the Israeli occupation, but celebrating the birth of the state of Palestine, side by side with Israel. It means not just ending the belligerence, but shaping a shared future of cooperation with our Arab neighbors. It means opposition to the militarism that permeates Israel *and* Palestine, an equal role for women of both nations in negotiations for peace, and a society that cares more about education, health, art, and the poor than it does about maintaining a deadly arsenal. It means a world in which we share our resources, rather than fight about them.

We in the Israeli peace movement demand an end to the occupation with its unremitting violence, some of it perpetrated by us, and some of it perpetrated against us. We know that Israel can return to its original vision, the vision of a country "based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel." Israelis and Palestinians have marched together under the banner, "We refuse to be enemies." Indeed, the Israeli and Palestinian peace movements have already made peace: on paper, in our hearts, in the lessons we teach our children, and in the behavior we model. We are allies for peace, united in our struggle against extremists and warmongers on both sides.

Israel has been a formidable opponent over its 60 years of history. We have won many battles, but we have yet to claim victory - the victory of peace with our neighbors. This victory will only come when Israel turns away from honing the instruments of war, from educating its sons to become warriors, and instead turns toward crafting the principles of a viable peace, a peace that will allow both sides to live and prosper. To accomplish this, it helps to have a Barak Obama in the White House, but it is more important to have an Israeli prime minister - and a Palestinian prime minister - who are weary of war, inspired by peace, and willing to speak the truth to both nations: that peace will only come through dialogue and compromise - on both sides.

Ending war in the Middle East may have a positive influence on ending the global rivalry between East and West. I don't know if peace in our tiny

corner of the world can have such a large impact, though it may be one element. But I do know that ending the occupation and making peace in the Middle East will not only mean the liberation of Palestine... it will mean the liberation of Israel as well, liberating us to turn our creative energy into more constructive, life-sustaining projects. Imagine what that could mean.

It is time to end the dynamic of war, in Israel, in Palestine, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Sudan, in the Congo - wherever war is used as a strategy to resolve conflict. War destroys: It destroys its perpetrators just as surely as it destroys its victims. We can no longer afford the luxury of acting out of our basest instincts. The time has come to hone the tools of peace: dialogue, solidarity, sharing. Our planet is too fragile, our lives too short. Let us lay down our weapons and celebrate life. There will still be great challenges for the strong and the brave. But the rest of us will no longer be left out, and the cemeteries will have fewer graves of small children and their parents who could not protect them.

As the great photographer and journalist Gervasio Sánchez has said, "La guerra funde nuestras mentes y nos roba los sueños" - war crushes our souls and robs us of our dreams. Let us make peace.

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