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Palestine

Gaza: "Better to be dead than go back to the way we were"

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV475 - August 2014 -

Publication date: Monday 18 August 2014

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Nearly 2,000 dead, more than 10,000 wounded, over 400,000 displaced, tens of thousands of buildings damaged or destroyed... The consequences of the Israeli aggression against Gaza are mounting, despite the succession of "truces" and other "ceasefires". It is simply, in terms of the human and material cost, the most violent Israeli offensive in the Palestinian territories since the 1967 war.

At present, attention is focussed on the "negotiations" underway in Cairo, to seek a lasting cease-fire. Will they succeed? That is far from certain. And even if they do, nothing will really be solved.

A "ceasefire"?

The dominant political and media narrative is heavily skewed by the Israeli point of view. "Hostilities" are reduced to the bombing of Gaza and the firing of Palestinian rockets. A solution to the "crisis" would therefore require an agreement to put an end to both. Western leaders and media could then take a deep breath and move on to other events, until in a year or two, Israel launches a new military campaign, on the pretext of further rocket fire, and everyone asks why the "truce" did not last...

The facts, however, are simple. The first hostility faced by Gaza and its people is the illegal and inhuman blockade imposed on the small coastal enclave, with the complicity of Egypt, for over 8 years. This blockade has destroyed life in Gaza and every day threatens its people a little more with a real humanitarian tragedy. A UN report published in 2012 indicated and Gaza would be "uninhabitable" by 2020 due to the lack of infrastructure (at least 800 additional health centres should be built, the number of schools should be doubled) and the lack of essential resources (prior to the current aggression, half of Gaza's inhabitants had no regular access to clean water and nearly 80% of the population had to settle for four hours of electricity per day).

The current Israeli operation has made the situation worse, with the damage estimated between 5 and 6 billion dollars (or about \$ 3,000 per capita). Gaza's only power plant has been destroyed and the authorities say it will take at least a year to repair it; thousands of buildings were damaged or destroyed, including schools, hospitals and essential industrial plants; the number of people dependent on international food aid has increased further to over 75% of the population. According to an official of the Israeli NGO Gisha, which has been campaigning for freedom of movement of goods and persons to and from Gaza, if the blockade is not lifted, "it will take 100 years to rebuild Gaza", because building materials in particular are being prevented from entering the Strip.

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In such a situation, and contrary to the prevailing account of the current negotiations, the Palestinian conditions for signing a cease-fire are absolutely not "maximalist" or "radical". In fact there has been a consensus on these demands among all Palestinian forces, including the very docile Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, headed by Mahmoud Abbas, whose tendency to "compromise", of rather "cave in", is only too well known. It might seem surprising that hardly any of those who praise the "moderation" of Abbas, as compared with the "radicalism" of Hamas, have pointed this out, if we did not already know that this kind of talk is primarily intended to weaken the

Palestinian side.

So what are these demands? The lifting of the blockade, of course, which means especially opening the borders with Israel and Egypt, the rebuilding Gaza's port and airport (which was destroyed and closed at the end of 2000), the extending of the fishing zone to 10 kilometres off Gaza's coast. As Francesca Albanese, a lawyer who has worked for eight years for the UN, points out, "None of these demands are new. The United Nations, among others, has consistently demanded the lifting of the siege, which is illegal under international law, as a condition for ending the disastrous humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. Allowing the movement of goods and people between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was already stipulated in the Access and Movement Agreement (AMA) signed between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority in 2005. Even the building of a port and the possibility of an airport in Gaza were included in the AMA, although neither was ever implemented. The current demand to expand the permitted fishing zone is less than that envisaged in 1994 in the Oslo Accords, and it was already part of the cease-fire terms in 2012."

There is nothing "maximalist" or "radical" in these demands, which simply reflect the minimum for the subsistence of the people of Gaza, and which are recognized as legitimate by all international organizations. It is these claims that Israel refuses to hear, demonstrating once again that what the occupying power rejects, in the name of its supposed security, is not the national rights of the Palestinian people (also enshrined in international law), but the satisfaction of their most elementary needs: housing, health care, adequate food, education and the ability to move about. Hence the exasperation of the people of Gaza and the Palestinian resistance organizations, and the more and more widespread feeling among people in the enclave, despite the violence of the current aggression, that, as Raji Sourani of the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR) put it: "It's better to die than to go back to the way we were before."

No justice, no peace!

Therefore there is zero intransigence on the part of the Palestinians, but rather a certain moderation, since no organization is today demanding satisfaction of all Palestinian national rights (the end of the civil and military occupation, self-determination and the right of return for refugees) in exchange for a cease-fire, but only basic rights and some breathing space. The intransigence is to be found, once again, on the side of the State of Israel, which demonstrates clearly, to anyone that might want to forget it, that it pursues, in the name of so-called "security", a painstaking project to destroy Palestinian society in order to prevent the Palestinians from being able to demand collectively their rights. This is one of the unspoken goals of the aggression against Gaza: to send the small coastal strip back to the stone age, so that people's concerns are not related to the struggle to end the occupation, but to the struggle for survival and reconstruction.

That is why, in the current negotiations, Israel has refused to countenance a real lifting of the blockade, which would indeed allow Gazans to breathe a bit and, ultimately, to reorganize to fight the occupation. One is tempted to say that the state of Israel would be wrong to behave in any other way, given that no one in the Western governments makes any demands on it, or sees the need to put any pressure against on it. On the contrary, they accuse the Palestinians of being responsible for the failure of the so-called "truces", and demand the latter cease to demand their most basic rights, in exchange for a "lull", that is an end to the massive bombings.

That is why it is very urgent to listen to the repeated calls of the Palestinian organizations, whether political organizations or those of civil society, who keep saying that the most urgent task now is to impose real sanctions against Israel, with the extension of the BDS (Boycott Divestment and Sanctions) campaign, the only thing that can exert real pressure on Israel and contribute to its isolation and a change in the balance of forces in favour of the Palestinians. As several civil society organizations in Gaza have stressed since July 15th, "without pressure and

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isolation, the Israeli regime has shown that it will continue to perpetrate massacres such as those we are witnessing at the moment, and that it has no intention of putting an end to decades of ethnic cleansing, military occupation and apartheid policies. (...) We invite you to join the growing campaign for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, in order to demand accountability from this rogue state that has once again shown itself so violent while enjoying the greatest impunity."

The best service we can render the Palestinians is to show as much determination and perseverance as them in making the Israeli state pay for the suffering it has inflicted. And this should also apply to all those who support it, notably the Hollande-Valls government. Whether there is a lasting truce or not, the fight must continue to prevent Israel from feeling free, in the future, to bomb, imprison, deport, kill and colonize. Whether it's their national rights or of their most basic rights to subsistence, the Palestinians' rights are not negotiable and cannot be sacrificed to the interests of the State of Israel and its Western and Arab allies. In other words, as the Palestinians and all those who are genuinely supportive of their cause have said for decades: without justice, there will be no peace.