



Can Gaza and Sderot Make Common Cause?

by Nadia Hijab

This column was syndicated by Agence Global on 26 November 2008.

"I feel great walking in the streets of Gaza...and not having that fear of a car being attacked by Israel, by a drone or a helicopter," said the Gaza-based *New York Times* journalist Taghreed El Khoudary.

The townspeople of Sderot no doubt express similar relief at the absence of rockets from Gaza.

The five-month Hamas-Israel cease-fire was holding, as even the AIPAC-allied Washington Institute for Near East Policy acknowledged in a recent piece.

And then Israeli forces pushed into the Gaza Strip to blow up a tunnel while the world focused on the US elections, and it's now back to the clashes and rockets.

The Palestinians of Gaza and the Israelis of Sderot are on two sides of a very wide divide. Yet an end to conflict would benefit both. Is there a way they can make common cause?

Much is known about conditions in Sderot, a pilgrimage for visiting Western dignitaries concerned about Israel's security. But little is known about the conditions in Gaza, perhaps least of all in Israel.

The people of Sderot might not be able -- or want -- to visit Gaza. But they could still find out what is going on in the besieged territory. For example,

- Heavy rains at the end of October left many Gazans waist-high in water, sewage and garbage and swept away several houses in another sign of the Strip's ruined infrastructure. Last year a flood of sewage killed five people.
- The Israelis never gradually lifted the blockade even though this was reportedly part of the Israel-Hamas agreement. The UN, responsible for feeding one million Palestinians in Gaza, has no reserves to call on. So even when Israel allows in a few trucks of food, the cupboard stays bare. And fishermen in Gaza waters have been arrested and their boats impounded, cutting off that source of sustenance.

- The Red Cross just issued a damning report chronicling the rise in chronic malnutrition due to Israel's blockade. This can damage children for life. People are reportedly milling animal feed because there is nothing to eat.

Israel has banned journalists from the Strip, making it harder to report conditions first-hand. Top leaders from the Associated Press, Reuters, the *New York Times*, ABC, BBC, and CNN, among others, filed an unprecedented protest with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

Collective punishment is against the law and can constitute a war crime. Do the inhabitants of Sderot -- or any Israeli Jewish citizens -- really want such crimes committed in their name? Do the Palestinian, Arab, European, or American authorities? Does the world? Especially when it has been demonstrated that a ceasefire works?

The question is why Israel decided to blow up the tunnel when it did, knowing this would lead to reprisals. There is much speculation: Israel and Hamas are positioning themselves in advance of negotiations to renew the ceasefire, which expires in December; Israeli parties in election mode "act tough" with Palestinians; Hamas wants to strengthen its hand since Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas' term expires on January 9.

Then there's the security argument: that Gaza tunnels beef up Hamas' armed forces. Of course, the notion that Hamas constitutes a military threat to Israel is ludicrous.

But Hamas does have a deterrent power that makes it costly to take out or ignore. So perhaps the explanation of Israel's Gaza policy lies elsewhere. If Barack Obama moves fast to address the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Palestinians are likely to get far less than their aspirations. Although Hamas favors a two-state solution, it may not accept a deal that rules out the Palestinian right of return, such as recently advocated by former national security advisors Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft in the *Washington Post*.

With Hamas trapped in Gaza amidst people struggling for their very survival, its ability to resist could become as dim as the candles in the electricity-starved Strip.

Whatever the reason, Israel's treatment of the Gaza Palestinians has for years violated their most basic human rights in an increasingly horrifying way, and has effectively kept Sderot under constant threat.

Difficult as it may be, the people of Sderot can make common cause with the people of Gaza. There are many precedents for Israeli-Palestinian solidarity. In January, Israeli peace groups organized more than 125 vehicles with seven tons of emergency supplies for the people of Gaza. Rallies were organized at both sides Erez Crossing checkpoint. A 17-year-old Israeli from Sderot bravely and movingly spoke of the need to end the violence and break the siege.

A comprehensive ceasefire that binds both sides throughout Palestine and Israel would end the rockets and should lift the siege until a final settlement is reached that brings peace and a measure of justice.

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