



THE PALESTINIANS IN ISRAEL AND OPERATION CAST LEAD: A VIEW FROM HAIFA

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Operation Cast Lead in Gaza did not come as a surprise to the Palestinians living within Israel's 1948 borders, but the severity of the onslaught sparked widespread popular protests, the most sustained and among the largest ever witnessed in the Arab community in Israel since the creation of the state. Protesters gathered daily, both spontaneously and under direction from the Higher Follow-Up Committee for the Arab Citizens of Israel, in rallies that took place from Sakhnin to Tel Aviv. These demonstrations—and the organizers behind them—were treated as hostile by both the Israeli media and the state security apparatus.

A FEW HOURS AFTER Israel launched its assault on the occupied Gaza Strip on Saturday, 27 December 2008, two large crowds of angry demonstrators set out from different points of the Galilee town of Nazareth, the “Capital of the Arabs in Israel.” Supporters of the Communist party and affiliated coalitions carried red banners along with Palestinian flags, while the Islamist demonstrators carried green banners interspersed with the national flag. Both loudly proclaimed their identification with Gaza and their rejection of Israel’s military crimes against the Palestinian people of Gaza. Eventually the two demonstrations converged on Nazareth’s main street at the very spot where, a few years earlier, a bitter controversy with sectarian overtones had raged over the Muslim shrine of Shihab al-Din, adjacent to the Basilica of the Annunciation.¹ But on this evening in late December, when the two groups commingled, memories of ideological difference and controversy were swept aside by feelings of solidarity and common purpose. Leaders from the various parties took turns addressing the demonstration, and their message was the same as the shouts that went up from the crowd: “Stop the massacre against our people in Gaza!”

In and of itself, Israel’s Operation Cast Lead in Gaza did not come as a surprise to the Palestinians living within Israel’s 1948 borders. Yet the severity of the onslaught, which reached an unprecedented degree of brutality, sparked widespread popular protests, the most sustained and among the largest ever witnessed in the Arab community in Israel since the creation of the state.

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From 27 December 2008 to 17 January 2009, when the Israeli military ended its assault, the anger of the Palestinian citizens never abated, fueled by an unending flow of horrendous reports and images of the massacres carried by Arab satellite channels like al-Jazeera, and by their own deep solidarity with the people of Gaza.

PUTTING ASIDE DIFFERENCES

On the evening of the first day of the military offensive, the Higher Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel,² the informal collective leadership framework and the highest political body for the Palestinian community, met at its headquarters in Nazareth. The committee declared a “Day of Wrath and Mourning for the Martyrs among our Compatriots in the Gaza Strip” and a general strike for the following day, 28 December. It also called for demonstrations and protest marches throughout the Galilee, the Little Triangle, the coastal region, and the Naqab [Negev]. The committee resolved to remain in permanent session for the duration of the crisis in order “to discuss combative, unified, and escalatory measures aimed at ending the hostilities and at breaking the siege imposed on our people in Gaza and opening all crossing points, starting with Rafah.” It also issued a “Political Communiqué of the Arab Population of Israel,” declaring that “the Israeli hostilities against fellow Palestinians in Gaza are an assault against all our people everywhere” and that “it is our duty to oppose and resist such actions and to break the siege.” The communiqué further affirmed Israel to be “a criminal state in all its constituent parts, including its political leaders and those entrusted with its security,” specifying that the state was “committing genocidal actions, war crimes, and crimes against humanity directed against our compatriots in the Gaza Strip.”

The dangers of Israel’s assault on the Palestinian people were aggravated by the fact that the Palestinian territories have been divided for some years by a grave schism between Fatah and Hamas that had come to a head with Hamas’s June 2007 takeover of the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian political parties and movements in Israel quickly adopted a clear and firm position for ending the split and warned of its risks. At the same time, the Higher Follow-Up Committee’s political communiqué emphatically and absolutely rejected “the conspiratorial tendency to blame the Islamic resistance movement Hamas or the Palestinian victims for the situation as a means of absolving Israel of its responsibility for the aggression.” It denounced the “collusion of Palestinian officials” and urgently called on the president of the Palestinian Authority “immediately to cease futile negotiations with Israel, which Israel is using to deepen Palestinian divisions in the West Bank and in Gaza.” Finally, the communiqué strongly affirmed “the call for a unified Palestinian national struggle based on support for Palestinian resistance confronting Israel’s genocidal hostilities.”

The national unity embodied in the stance of the Higher Follow-Up Committee was also manifested in the various parties and organizations it comprises. Some months earlier, at the end of October 2008, the date for new Israeli

parliamentary elections had been set for 11 February 2009. The Arab political parties were just gearing up for their electoral campaigns and activities when Operation Cast Lead was launched, and the usually divisive internal debates and electioneering among the competing parties immediately ceased. The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (known as *al-Jabha* in Arabic and *Hadash* in Hebrew; made up of the Communist party and other progressive Arab-Jewish political movements), the National Democratic Assembly (the nationalist party also known as *Tajamu'* or *Balad*, formerly led by the now-exiled Palestinian leader Azmi Bishara), and the Islamic affiliated United Arab List (*al-Muwabada*) all gave absolute priority to protesting the invasion. The usual partisan slogans gave way to expressions of concern for Gaza and its people: stickers, posters, and pictures proclaiming solidarity with Gaza appeared on walls, car windows, and children's book bags in Arab streets and neighborhoods all over the country. Activists and cadres—including those in detention—from across the political spectrum met daily, demonstrating, signing petitions, and organizing aid. Those who spoke at demonstrations, popular assemblies, or on satellite television called on their brethren in the West Bank, where protests had been muted partly because of internal divisions, to follow their example and put aside differences in the face of the common threat.³

LARGEST ARAB DEMONSTRATIONS IN ISRAEL'S HISTORY

Israel's Palestinian citizens had not waited for the Higher Follow-Up Committee's directives in order to act. Immediately upon hearing the news of the assault on 27 December, citizens throughout the Arab areas went to the streets to express their anger: spontaneous demonstrations in numerous locations quickly materialized in response to telephone calls, e-mails, and word of mouth.

But the involvement of the supreme leadership clearly framed and galvanized the protests. In the days and weeks that followed, statements from the Higher Follow-Up Committee's communiqué were echoed in the chants and slogans of the demonstrators who filled Arab village and town streets and neighborhoods across Israel. The committee's assertion that "the steadfastness of our people is stronger than the hostile Israeli plot aimed at breaking our will and destroying our resistance" was expressed in the chant "Whatever tanks or guns you send, Gaza's knees will never bend!"⁴ Similarly, the call "to denounce the collusion of foreign governments with Israel concerning its offensive, and to regard those who collude or remain silent as accessories to the crime" was translated into the slogan "History taught us, and it said: America is the viper's head!"⁵ As for the Higher Follow-Up Committee's criticism of "the collusion of Arab governments, which Israel exploits to disguise its premeditated hostilities," its denunciation of "Arab spinelessness," and its demand that Arab governments having relations with Israel "sever them and withdraw their diplomatic missions from the country," all these statements were succinctly

summarized by the demonstrators' chant "Shame and disgrace that all can see: Arab leaders are not free!"

Throughout the entire three weeks of Operation Cast Lead, hardly a day passed without some kind of protest march or demonstration in one or more localities, from the Galilee in the north to the Naqab in the south. Demonstrations were held in dozens of large or medium-sized Arab towns in Israel and in numerous smaller towns and villages up until the last day of hostilities. Of particular significance were demonstrations in several Druze towns; this community, traditionally perceived as identifying more closely with Israel than other Arab groups as a result of the systematic Israeli policy of dividing Palestinians into religious groups, has in recent years been showing signs of change, and the demonstrations were seen as yet another indication of these.⁶ The large demonstrations, advertised in the Arabic press and radio, the Internet, mosques and churches, and through flyers, were organized and coordinated directly by political parties and other large organizations acting within the framework of the Higher Follow-Up Committee. But many protests were local initiatives organized by local cadres of the parties, leadership bodies, councils, or solidarity groups. The "Internet generation," often characterized as politically apathetic and totally absorbed in "chat" gossip, played an active role in the mobilizing efforts, concocting catchy political slogans and sending out streams of messages, blog posts, photographs, and video on YouTube and Facebook to extensive networks around the country (and beyond). Young people were also an important presence at the protest marches and demonstrations.

After almost a week of nonstop killing in Gaza by artillery shells and missiles fired from U.S.-made planes and helicopters, the Higher Follow-Up Committee called the first of three "national" protests, set for the morning of 3 January 2009 in the Arab town of Sakhnin.⁷ The choice of this town had symbolic significance because of its association with the first Land Day protests: it was in Sakhnin that on 30 March 1976 three unarmed citizens were shot dead by Israeli police while peacefully protesting Israel's massive confiscation of Palestinian lands in the context of its program to "Judaize" the Galilee. Three other Arab citizens were also killed elsewhere in the country during the demonstrations, which took place during a general strike called by the Committee for Land Protection in which all Arab towns participated. Sakhnin was also a site of mass demonstrations in October 2000, when the Arab citizens spontaneously demonstrated against Israeli brutalities in the West Bank and Gaza (this soon morphed into the second intifada): two of Sakhnin's young residents were among the thirteen shot dead by Israeli police during those demonstrations.

Even given Sakhnin's prominence in earlier historic protests, the 3 January 2009 demonstration exceeded all expectations. Arab citizens converged on the town from all over the country, not just from elsewhere in the Galilee and the nearby Little Triangle, from Haifa and Jaffa and Acre, but also from the distant Naqab. Arriving in private cars, group taxis, and buses, the crowd was huge and varied, with men and women of all ages, including whole families with

young children. Some were dressed in black, a sign of mourning for the dead of Gaza, and many of the young men and women wore kaffiyehs as a badge of national pride. Young people abounded, mostly in jeans and colorful T-shirts sporting images ranging from Che Guevara to reproductions of works by Palestinian artists, or wearing T-shirts specifically made for the occasion with slogans like “Gaza, don’t be afraid!” or “IDF: Get out of Gaza!” The crowd, carrying Palestinian flags, banners, and placards with slogans, marched from the center of town to the Memorial for the Martyrs of Land Day 1976 and October 2000 on the other side of town.

Independent sources such as al-Arabiyya and al-Jazeera estimated the crowd at more than 100,000 people; organizers put the number as high as 120,000, setting a record as the largest Palestinian Arab demonstration ever held in Israel. Two other “national” protests were called by the Higher Follow-Up Committee, one in Baqa al-Gharbiyya in the Little Triangle on 9 January, and the second in Arara in the Naqab on 16 January, but neither drew anywhere near the numbers of the Sakhnin event. I attended the demonstration in Baqa al-Gharbiyya, where the crowd of some 10,000 was mostly from elsewhere in the Little Triangle. The demonstration at Arara was larger, estimated at between 12,000 and 15,000 persons.

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little coverage in the Israeli media. The few items that did appear were short notices that seemed designed more to support the prevailing Israeli discourse of disloyal Arab citizens than to inform Jewish society about what was happening in the Arab areas of the country. By contrast, al-Jazeera and other satellite channels covered the demonstrations extensively, with contextual background, live footage, and interviews with demonstrators and party leaders.

To break through this media barrier, Palestinians were keen to hold demonstrations in the overwhelmingly Jewish city of Tel Aviv. The most important of these was organized for the same day as the Sakhnin demonstration: The same buses that brought protestors to the Galilee town in the morning left in early afternoon for Israel’s largest city, with other protestors arriving from elsewhere in the country. In Tel Aviv itself, thousands of Palestinians were joined by a few thousand Jewish activists, remnants of the peace movement and the Left, and a predominantly Palestinian crowd of some 15,000 men and women marched through the city’s main streets surrounded by a tight police cordon, although no arrests were made. Toward the end of the march—and despite the police cordon—several hundred pro-war demonstrators tried to disrupt the peaceful event, and scattered skirmishes took place. Not surprisingly, the police provided protection for the attackers and did not arrest any of them. The demonstration revived the perennial debate within Palestinian activist groups and parties concerning the utility of Arab-Jewish

joint political action, but the consensus reached was that it was imperative under the circumstances to protest in the heart of Israeli society.

As for the demonstrations in the mixed towns, these were generally local affairs, with some participation from outlying villages but little from other towns.⁸ In Haifa, for example, protest activities were held at the intersection of al-Jabal and al-Karmal streets, sometimes wending their way down through Wadi Nisnas, the main Arab quarter of the city. Small demonstrations and marches were also held daily in Acre until the end of the operation, with demonstrations also occurring in the Arab neighborhoods of Ramla and Lydda. Palestinian students also organized demonstrations and protests at universities in Haifa, Tel Aviv, Beersheba, and Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Palestinian citizens did not limit themselves to protest marches and solidarity demonstrations. Throughout the Arab areas of Israel, local support groups and political parties collected money, clothing, supplies, and medicines for the Palestinians in Gaza. Umm al-Fahm, for example, collected 6 million shekels (about \$1.5 million) to give to UNRWA for delivery in Gaza, and a blood drive was organized at the leading hospital in Nazareth via the Red Cross to help hospitals in Gaza.

POLICE REPRESSION AND “SOCIAL SANCTIONS”

Israeli authorities, who are fond of proclaiming their state “the only democracy in the Middle East,” were not happy with the strong popular protest against Operation Cast Lead. However, drawing a lesson from the political fallout of the state’s bloody suppression of earlier demonstrations—the aforementioned shooting deaths of thirteen unarmed citizens in the October 2000 protests forced the government to appoint an official commission of inquiry, whose findings had important political consequences—this time the authorities refrained from firing live bullets, and even tear gas was used sparingly. Still, the police presence was highly visible, with officers positioned in full force around Arab areas and police cordons set up around towns where demonstrations were being held. They did not prevent demonstrations, but they also did not hesitate in some situations to bludgeon and beat hundreds of Palestinians around the country. Even entirely peaceful symbolic acts such as candlelight vigils to honor the victims were not spared. On New Year’s Eve, for example, dozens of young men and women gathered in Haifa’s German Colony and began silently placing lighted candles on the sidewalk, neither chanting slogans nor in any way disrupting traffic. Within minutes, a Special Forces police unit suddenly attacked, raining blows on the young people with cudgels, kicking them, punching them with their fists, and making arrests. A young woman who had been injured in the violence was among those arrested, and as she was taken to the city hospital under tight police guard, her husband and several friends insisted on accompanying her. One of the police guards was a young Arab, with whom hostile glances were exchanged. But in the crush of people, he managed to approach me and the young woman’s husband to say quietly,

“Do you think what is happening doesn’t hurt me? I swear, my mother hasn’t stopped crying for Gaza.”

In addition to police barricades and arrests, Shabak (Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security agency) was fully mobilized for the duration of Operation Cast Lead. Within days of its launch, on 31 December 2008, Adalah—The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel sent an urgent letter to the state’s attorney general detailing how dozens of Palestinian party leaders and heads of political movements had been summoned by the secret service to so-called “meetings” (on the false claim that they were required by law to attend, which in fact was not the case).⁹ Once there, they were informed that they would be held criminally liable for any legal violations committed by anyone associated with their party or movement and that they were personally expected to prevent any disruption of “public order.” Finally, the activists and political leaders were instructed to relay the information to their colleagues. Adalah’s appeal called for the immediate end to the intimidation and threats, which it saw as part of Shabak’s continuing efforts to interfere in legitimate activities organized by Arab political bodies in Israel. In Adalah’s view, threats aimed at preventing the expression of solidarity with the residents of Gaza are themselves illegal insofar as they infringe on the Arab citizens’ legal right to organize, demonstrate, and express their views.

Above and beyond official action, there were also commercial and economic sanctions unofficially imposed by large segments of Israeli society against Arab citizens. As invariably happens when Arab citizens peacefully protest Israeli government policies, most Jewish citizens respond by boycotting Arab businesses. The Arab markets, stores, and restaurants of Nazareth and Haifa, for example, which are traditionally magnets for Jewish shoppers on the Sabbath, were totally deserted by the Jewish clientele for the duration of Operation Cast Lead. Acre, where the Arab market and stores had already been under “boycott” since the Yom Kippur confrontations of October 2008,¹⁰ saw a tightening of the boycott, which was still in place by mid-March. Dismissals of Arab workers generally increase in such periods, although statistics are not available to confirm this.

ARAB CITIZENS AND ISRAEL’S WARS

The Arab citizens of Israel are accustomed to being regarded with suspicion both by Israeli officials and the majority of Jewish citizens. This suspicion grows whenever Israel wages a new war and Palestinian citizens protest, pitting the community directly against the Jewish majority’s habitually solid wartime consensus. The events of October 2000 can be seen as a watershed in this regard. Indeed, Israeli public bitterness against the Palestinians for demonstrating in solidarity with their fellow Palestinians across the Green Line at the outbreak of the second intifada ushered in a deterioration of Arab-Jewish relations that has not yet been reversed. Since that time, a new “norm” of political and cultural separation between the Jewish and Palestinian communities has emerged

under the impact of an increasingly racist discourse and increasingly racist laws.¹¹ Even so, the Israeli Jewish consensus reached new and fearsome levels at the time of Israel's July 2006 invasion of Lebanon, when the unbroken ranks behind the war brought images of Sparta to mind. The Israeli Jewish consensus during Operation Cast Lead was, if anything, even more powerful than it had been during the Lebanon war, as it involved an imposed solution "closer to home" and was met with far greater international (including Arab) silence with regard to the crimes committed.

Yet despite the negative consequences for their own status and position, Israel's Arab citizens have never stood by the sidelines when the state launches military assaults to crush resistance to its will or to impose solutions it had been unable to achieve through political means. Thus the Palestinians in Israel took to the streets against Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon to root out the PLO presence there, and against the Sabra and Shatila massacres, and again in October 2000 with tragic consequences, and finally against the war against Gaza in which civilians were the main victims. In all these Israeli military assaults, Palestinian citizens have been forced to confront the same basic issues that have determined their own fate within Israel and will continue to do so in the future. It is this deep awareness that motivates Palestinian political action in Israel under conditions of constant contact and daily friction with the constituent parts and policies of the Israeli establishment.

In the case of the Lebanon war of 2006, the situation for Palestinian citizens was slightly different, complicated by the fact that the Galilee, traditionally the heart of Palestinian protests, was geographically within range of Hizballah rockets. A number of towns were hit; indeed, almost half the civilian deaths in Israel during the war were Palestinian citizens.¹² In such circumstances, demonstrations and protest marches were far more limited, although Arab citizens were active in providing emergency services and collecting relief funds. Most significantly, despite the rocket fire, Palestinian anger was spontaneously directed against Israel, which had launched the war, rather than against the Lebanese resistance. I remember when a rocket fired from southern Lebanon slammed into the offices of Haifa's *al-Ittibad* newspaper, where I had been worked for years. I stood dumbfounded amid the rubble, unable to take in the fact that this newspaper that had always given voice to nationalistic protest could have been struck by rockets fired by the Lebanese resistance. But a neighbor calmly told me, "This is nothing, brother. The building can be repaired. And this rocket is Olmert's responsibility."

LAND DAY 2009

There is one occasion a year when the Palestinian citizens regularly hold demonstrations without the trigger of external events: Land Day, the "national day" of the Palestinians in Israel. It is important not only because it commemorates the first countrywide Arab protests and its consequent martyrs, but

because it is about the issue that most expresses the essence of the community's struggle.

The issue of land and dispossession is a bridge between the Palestinians inside Israel's 1948 borders and those of the occupied territories and the diaspora. It is also a link between local grievances and "national" concerns, and the chants, slogans, and speeches commemorating the day alternate between denunciations of the occupation and calls for the equal rights of citizens.

Just two months after the end of Operation Cast Lead, I took part in the activities marking the thirty-third anniversary of Land Day in the Galilee. I marched with the mostly young crowd from the town of Sakhnin to the village of Dayr Hanna, passing through the village of Arrabeh. A group of young men in their early twenties stood in an open car taking turns chanting slogans through a megaphone of limited power. I recorded a number of these. Here is a sampling: "Our Galilee, you're unique, your soil is more precious than gold!" "We refuse to live in humiliation, even if we end up as fuel for the fires of hell!" "Arrabeh yells and Sakhnin shouts: Bibi and Barak are criminal louts!" "Hey, Gaza, never tremble, you are all dignity and honor!" and "From Sakhnin to Beirut, a people alive will not die!" Later, a youth hands me a round sticker with the four-colored Palestinian flag in the center, the words "For the freedom of Palestine, boycott Israel" written across the top, and "Freedom, Return, Equality" along the bottom. Perhaps this small round sticker, with its simple statements, says everything that needs to be said about the reality, memory, and dreams among the Palestinians in Israel.

NOTES

1. The origins of the conflict date back to 1992, when the Communist-dominated Nazareth municipal council embarked on the "Nazareth 2000" project to prepare the city for tourists, dignitaries, and the Pope to usher in the new millennium. While preparing the ground for a plaza southeast of the Basilica of the Annunciation, differences arose over the holy shrine of Shihab al-Din, triggering a battle over the city's identity between the Islamic movement and the municipal council. It later became known that the Israeli establishment had a hand in inflaming the conflict through a special advisor to then-prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

2. The Higher Follow-Up Committee is composed of the main leaders of the Arab community in Israel, including its elected representatives (Arab Knesset members, Arab mayors, and heads of local councils) and the secretaries and leaders of all

national parties and movements; heads of major NGOs participate as advisors. Although the Israeli government does not officially recognize the Higher Follow-Up Committee, it takes into account its decisions and stances, viewing it as a representative body of Israel's one million Palestinian citizens.

3. There have been many theories about the relative quietism in the West Bank during the operation. Aside from the strangulating impact of geographical fragmentation on any attempts at mass action, explanations from West Bank journalist colleagues focus on the Fatah-Hamas split, efforts by some official actors to limit the size of—if not totally suppress—protest demonstrations, and Israeli threats, conveyed through secret channels, of consequences (including the launch of a far-reaching military offensive against the West Bank) if things got out of hand.

4. [Literally, "Hashim's Gaza will never kneel before tank or cannon." Hashim, the grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad, is believed to be buried in Gaza.—*Trans.*]

5. [This is a literal translation, but nonrhyming in the original Arabic.—*Trans.*]

6. Druze youth, alone among the Arab citizens, are required by special decree to perform Israeli military service upon graduating from high school. A strategic study presented at the ninth annual Herzliya conference held in early February 2009, however, revealed that the proportion of Druze conscripts among Arab youth living within Israel's 1948 borders had dropped below 50 percent as a result of refusal to serve or other means of evasion. Despite official Israeli secretiveness concerning the full facts of the matter, authorities indicated that the position of the community, as measured against a scale measuring patriotic commitment to Israel, was at its lowest in twenty years.

7. The fact that the demonstration was held the same day as the beginning of the Israeli ground assault was coincidental. The date for the demonstration had been set days before the date of the launch was known. Nor is there any evidence that the ground assault influenced the size of the crowd, as the Arab community had been seething with anger from the moment the campaign began.

8. The reverse was not true: demonstrations in villages were almost always attended by its own residents only, except when nearby villages teamed up to

hold a joint protest, sometimes at an intersection between them.

9. See "Adalah to AG: Summoning Political Activists to GSS Investigation is an Attempt to Frighten Them from Participating in Demonstrations of Solidarity with Gaza," Adalah press release, 2 January 2009. Available at www.adalah.org/eng/pressreleases/pr.php?file=09_1_2_1.

10. On 8 October 2008, the eve of Yom Kippur, an Arab citizen was viciously attacked by Jewish religious extremists for driving his car in violation of fundamentalist interpretations of the Torah; the attack transformed the city into an arena of violent confrontation as Arabs came out in protest against what they saw as a racially motivated assault and clashed with police. In retaliation, racist Jewish groups set fire to the homes and cars of Arab citizens near the old city; the rampage continued for two weeks, during which fifteen forcibly evacuated Arab families could not return to their homes. See Adalah, "October 2008 in Akka: Course of Events," 14 October 2008, available at www.adalah.org/features/aka%202008/Report-English.pdf.

11. For example, the 2003 Nationality and Entry into Israel Law prohibits the granting of residency or citizenship status to Palestinian residents of the occupied territories married to Palestinians citizens of Israel.

12. Of the thirty-nine civilian deaths during the Lebanon war, eighteen were Palestinian citizens from the Galilee and Haifa.