

THE GAZA FIASCO



JENNIFER LOEWENSTEIN

ColdType



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Jennifer Loewenstein is a visiting Fellow
at the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford
University in England.

She can be reached at
amadea311@earthlink.net

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A GREAT CHARADE

is taking place in front of the world media in the Gaza Strip. It is the staged evacuation of 8,000 Jewish settlers from their illegal settlement homes, and it has been carefully designed to create imagery to support Israel's US-backed takeover of the West Bank and cantonization of the Palestinians. There was never the slightest reason for Israel to send in the army to remove these settlers. The entire operation could have been managed, without the melodrama necessary for a media frenzy, by providing them with a fixed date on which the IDF would withdraw from inside the Gaza Strip. A week before, all the settlers will quietly have left —with no TV cameras, no weeping girls, no anguished soldiers, no commentators asking cloying questions of how Jews could remove other Jews from their homes, and no more trauma about their terrible suffering, the world's victims, who therefore have to be helped to kick the Palestinians out of the West Bank.

The settlers will relocate to other parts of Israel — and in some cases to other illegal settlements in the West Bank — handsomely compensated for their inconvenience. Indeed, each Jewish family leaving the Gaza Strip will receive between \$140,000 and \$400,000 just for the cost of the home they leave behind.

But these details are rarely mentioned in the tempest of reporting on the “great confrontation” and “historical moment” brought to us by Sharon and

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the thieving, murderous settler-culture he helped create.

On ABC's Nightline, a reporter interviewed a young, sympathetic Israeli woman from the largest Gaza settlement, Neve Dekalim – a girl with sincerity in her voice, holding back tears. She doesn't view the soldiers as her enemy, she says, and doesn't want violence. She will leave even though to do so is causing her great pain.

She talked about the tree she planted in front of her home with her brother when she was three; about growing up in the house they were now leaving, the memories, and knowing she could never return; that even if she did, everything she knew would be gone from the scene.

The camera then panned to her elderly parents sitting somberly amid boxed-up goods, surveying the scene, looking forlorn and resigned. Her mother was a kindergarten teacher, we are told. She knew just about all of the children who grew up here near the sea.

In the five years of Israel's brutal suppression of the Palestinian uprising against the occupation, I never once saw or heard a segment as long and with as much sentimental, human detail as I did here; I never once remember a reporter allowing a sympathetic young Palestinian woman, whose home was just bulldozed and who lost everything she owned, tell of her pain and sorrow, of her memories and her family's memories; I never got to listen to her reflect on where she would go now and how she would live.

And yet in Gaza alone more than 23,000 people have lost their homes to Israeli bulldozers and bombs since September 2000 – often at a moment's notice – on the grounds that they “threatened Israel's security.”

The vast majority of the destroyed homes were located too close to an IDF military outpost or illegal settlement to be allowed to continue standing. The victims received no compensation for their losses and had no place waiting for them to relocate.

Most ended up in temporary UNRWA tent-cities until they could find shelter elsewhere in the densely overcrowded Strip, a quarter of whose best land was inhabited by the 1% of the population that was Jewish and occupying the land at their expense.

Where were the cameramen in May 2004 in Rafah when refugees twice over lost their homes again in a single night's raid, able to retrieve nothing of what they

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owned?

Where were they when bulldozers and tanks tore up paved streets with steel blades, wrecked the sewage and water pipes, cut electricity lines, and demolished a park and a zoo; when snipers shot two children, a brother and sister, feeding their pigeons on the roof of their home? When the occupying army fired a tank shell into a group of peaceful demonstrators killing 14 of them including two children?

Where have they been for the past five years when the summer heat of Rafah makes life so unbearable it is all one can do to sit quietly in the shade of one's corrugated tin roof – because s/he is forbidden to go to the sea, ten minutes' walking distance from the city center? Or because if they ventured to the more open spaces they became walking human targets? And when their citizens resisted, where were the accolades and the admiring media to comment on the “pluck,” the “will” and “audacity” of these “young people”?

On Tuesday, 16 August, the Israeli daily Haaretz reported that more than 900 journalists from Israel and around the world were covering the events in Gaza, and that hundreds of others were in cities and towns in Israel to cover local reactions.

Were there ever that many journalists in one place during the past 5 years to cover the Palestinian Intifada?

Where were the 900 international journalists in April 2002 after the Jenin refugee camp was laid to waste in the matter of a week in a show of pure Israeli hubris and sadism?

Where were the 900 international journalists last fall when the Jabalya refugee camp in Gaza lay under an Israeli siege and more than 100 civilians were killed? Where were they for five years while the entire physical infrastructure of the Gaza Strip was being destroyed?

Which one of them reported that every crime of the Israeli occupation – from home demolitions, targeted assassinations and total closures to the murder of civilians and the wanton destruction of commercial and public property-increased significantly in Gaza after Sharon's “Disengagement” Plan – that great step toward peace – was announced?

Where are the hundreds of journalists who should be covering the many non-violent protests by Palestinians and Israelis against the Apartheid Wall?

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Non-violent protesters met with violence and humiliation by Israeli armed forces? Where are the hundreds of journalists who should be reporting on the economic and geographic encirclement of Palestinian East Jerusalem and of the bisection of the West Bank and the subdivision of each region into dozens of isolated mini-prisons?

Why aren't we being barraged by outraged reports about the Jewish-only bypass roads? About the hundreds of pointless internal checkpoints? About the countless untried executions and maimings? About the torture and abuse of Palestinians in Israeli prisons?

Where were these hundreds of journalists when each of the 680 Palestinian children shot to death by Israeli soldiers over the last 5 years was laid to rest by grief-stricken family members? The shame of it all defies words.

Instead, report after report announces the "end to the 38 year occupation" of the Gaza Strip, a "turning point for peace" and the news that "it is now illegal for Israelis to live in Gaza." Is this some kind of joke?

Yes, it is "illegal for Israelis to live in the Gaza Strip" as colonizers from another land. It has been illegal for 38 years. (If they wish to move there and live as equals with the Palestinians and not as Israeli citizens they may do so.)

Sharon's unilateral "Disengagement" plan is not ending the occupation of Gaza. The Israelis are not relinquishing control over the Strip.

They are retaining control of all land, air and sea borders including the Philadelphi corridor along the Gaza/Egypt border where the Egyptians may be allowed to patrol under Israel's watchful eye and according to Israel's strictest terms. The 1.4 million inhabitants of Gaza remain prisoners in a giant penal colony, despite what their partisan leaders are attempting to claim.

The IDF is merely redeploying outside the Gaza Strip, which is surrounded by electrical and concrete fences, barbed wire, watchtowers, armed guards and motion sensors, and it will retain the authority to invade Gaza on a whim. Eight thousand Palestinian workers working in Israel for slave wages will soon be banned from returning to work.

Another 3,200 Palestinians who worked in the settlements for a sub-minimum-wage have been summarily dismissed without recourse to severance pay or other forms of compensation.

Still others will lose their livelihoods when the Israelis move the Gaza Industrial

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Zone from Erez to somewhere in the Negev desert.

The World Bank reported in December 2004 that both poverty and unemployment will rise following the “Disengagement” even under the best of circumstances because Israel will retain full control over the movement of goods in and out of Gaza, will maintain an enforced separation of the West Bank and Gaza preventing the residents of each from visiting one another, and will draw up separate customs agreements with each zone severing their already shattered economies – and yet we are forced to listen day in and day out to news about this historic peace initiative, this great turning point in the career of Ariel Sharon, this story of national trauma for the brothers and sisters who have had to carry out the painful orders of their wise and besieged leader.

What will it take to get the truth across to people? To the young woman of Neve Dekalim who can speak her words without batting an eyelash of embarrassment or shame?

As the cameras zoom in on angry settlers poignantly clashing with their “brothers and sisters” in the Israeli army, who will be concerned about their other brothers and sisters in Gaza?

When will the Palestinian history of 1948 and 1967, and of each passing day under the violence of dispossession and dehumanization, get a headline in our papers?

I am reminded of an interview I had this summer in Beirut with Hussein Nabulsi of Hizbullah – an organization that has had nothing to do with the movement for Palestinian national liberation whatsoever, but one that has become allied with those it sees as the real victims of US and Israeli policies and lies.

I remember his tightly shut eyes and his clenched fists as he asked how long Arabs and Muslims were supposed to accept the accusations that they are the victimizers and the terrorists. “It hurts,” he said in a whispered ardor. “It hurts so much to watch this injustice every day.” And he went on to explain to me why the Americans and the Israelis – with their monstrous military arsenals – will never be victorious.



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