Two sides of the Palestinian coin: Hunger strike/Gaza

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After 40 days, Palestinian prisoners suspended their hunger strike which they had launched in April in protest against Israel's oppressive prison conditions. Not unexpectedly, the international media (particularly the Western media) paid scant notice to their plight, just as it has pointedly ignored the deepening crisis facing the people of Gaza, impoverished by the prison-like conditions imposed by the Israeli authorities and subjected to their brutal military attacks. Richard Falk comments.

THE Palestinian hunger strike protesting Israeli prison conditions was suspended on 27 May after 40 days, at a time when many of the 1,000 or so strikers were experiencing serious deterioration of health - most were by then hospitalised - and when the holy period of Ramadan was about to commence, creating continuity between the daytime fasting of the Muslim faithful and the prior desperate protest of the strikers.

What was perhaps most notable about this extraordinary gesture of a mass prolonged hunger strike was that it was treated as hardly worthy of notice by the world media or even by the United Nations, which ironically is regularly attacked by diplomats and the media in the West for being overly preoccupied with Israeli wrongdoing.

It needs appreciating that recourse to a collective hunger strike is a most demanding form of political resistance, invariably provoked by prolonged outrage, requiring courage and a willingness to endure hardship by participants, as well as subjecting their will to as harsh a test as life offers. To continue foregoing food for 40 days is a life-threatening and heroic act, a commitment never lightly undertaken.

With Bobby Sands as their leader, 10 imprisoned Irish Republican Army (IRA) hunger strikers starved themselves unto their death in 1981. The world watched in rapt attention as this extraordinary spectacle of self-inflicted death unfolded day by day. Without openly acknowledging what was happening before their eyes, hardened political leaders in London silently took notice of the moral challenge they confronted, shifting tactics abruptly and beginning to work towards a political compromise for Northern Ireland in a manner that would have been unthinkable without the strike.

The Palestinians can harbour no such hopes, at least in the near term. Israel deliberately clouds the moral and political embedded challenges by releasing videotapes supposedly showing 'snacks' secretly being eaten by the strike leader, Marwan Barghouti. The fact that this accusation was vigorously denied by his immediate family and lawyer is occasionally noted in the world media, but only as a detail that does not diminish the impact of discrediting the authenticity of the strike. Whether true or not, Israel succeeded in shifting attention away from the strike and avoids doing anything significant to improve prison conditions, much less take steps to end the severe abuses of the Palestinian people over the course of an incredible period of 70 years with no end in sight. Prison authorities immediately resorted to punitive measures to torment those prisoners who were on strike. Such a response underscores 'democratic' Israel's refusal to treat with respect non-violent forms of resistance by the Palestinian people.

At the same time as the prison drama was unfolding, Gaza was experiencing a deepening of its prolonged crisis that has been cruelly manipulated by Israel to keep the civilian population of almost two million on the brink of starvation and in constant fear of military onslaught.

Supposedly the caloric intake for subsistence has been used as a benchmark by Israeli authorities for restricting the flow of food to Gaza. And since that seems insufficient to impose the level of draconian control sought by Israel, three massive military attacks and countless incursions since the end of 2008 have inflicted heavy casualties on the civilian population of Gaza and caused much devastation, a cumulative catastrophe for this utterly vulnerable, impoverished, captive population. In such a context, the fact that Hamas has retaliated with what weaponry it possessed, even if indiscriminate, is to be expected even if not in accord with international humanitarian law.

A leading intellectual resident of Gaza, Haidar Eid, has recently written a poignant dispatch from the frontlines of continuous flagrant Israeli criminality, 'On Gaza and the horror of the siege'. Eid ended his essay with these disturbing lines:

'We fully understand that the deliberate withholding of food or the means to grow food in whatever form is yet another strategy of Israel's occupation, colonisation, and apartheid in Palestine, and, therefore, should be viewed as an abnormality, even a pogrom!

'But what we in Gaza cannot fathom is: Why it is allowed to happen?'

At the start of Ramadan, Eid appealed to the world to stand up against what he calls 'incremental genocide' 'by heeding the BDS [boycott, divestment, sanctions] call made by Palestinian Civil Society'.

It is significant that Eid's appeal was to civil society rather than to the Palestinian Authority entrusted with representing the Palestinian people on the global stage, or for a revival of 'the peace process' that went on for 20 years within the Oslo Framework, or to the UN that accepted responsibility after Britain gave up its Palestine mandate at the end of World War II. These conventional modes of conflict resolution have all failed, while steadily worsening the situation of the Palestinian people and nurturing the ambition of the Zionist movement to reach its goal of territorial expansion.

Beyond this, Eid noted that the authority of BDS is a result of an authoritative Palestinian call to which the peoples of the world are implored to respond. This shift away from intergovernmental empowerment from above to a reliance on empowerment by a victimised people and their authentic representatives embodies Palestinian hopes for a more humane future, and for an eventual realisation of long-denied rights.

It is appropriate to merge in our moral imagination the ordeals of the prisoners in Israeli jails with those of the people of Gaza, without forgetting the encompassing fundamental reality - the Palestinian people as a whole, regardless of their specific circumstances, are being victimised by an Israeli structure of domination and discrimination in a form that constitutes apartheid and different forms of captivity.

It seems that the hunger strike failed to induce Israel to satisfy many of the demands of the strikers for improved conditions. What it did achieve was to remind Palestinians and the world of the leadership gifts of Marwan Barghouti, and it awakened the Palestinian population to the moral and political imperative of sustaining and manifesting resistance as an alternative to despair, passivity and submission.

Israelis and some of their most ardent supporters speak openly of declaring victory for themselves, defeat for the Palestinians. Regardless of our religious or ethnic identity, we who live outside the circle of Israeli oppression should be doing our utmost to prevent any outcome that prolongs Palestinian unjust suffering or accepts it as inevitable.

What is unspeakable must become undoable.