

Obama's Failed 'Hope' in Gaza

Eight years ago, President Obama offered "hope" for change in the world, but politics and pressures won out, with his failure nowhere more obvious than in Gaza, as Palestinian journalist Mohammed Omer explains in this open letter.

By Mohammed Omer

To President Barack Obama

Dear Mr. President,

As president of the most powerful country on the planet; the loving and protective father of two children; and a man fully aware of the human struggles of so many in the down-trodden communities of many lands, including your own, your eyes must have been opened during the last three – of many – Israeli assaults on besieged Gaza, where I live with my wife and young son.

I recall being in the Netherlands when you were first elected president. Like so many millions around the world, I cheered loudly for you, believing that a fresh wind was blowing through the narrow halls of U.S. politics. I dared to hope that a brave man – a champion of good people who were neglected and abused – had arrived to stand up and ease the pain and injustice inflicted on so many, including my people in Palestine, long tormented and driven from their ancient land, deprived of their human dignity.

Sadly, however, I perhaps dared to believe too much. As I look around Gaza today and see only the aftermath of more Israeli cruelty and evidence of ever more bloodshed, pain, sadness and destruction, the words "Yes, we can" now drift away with the dust, carried by the winds of despair.

This despair has hung over our heads for at least the past 10 years, the result of Israel's harsh collective punishment of the 1.9 million human beings who struggle to survive in Gaza. Half of them are children younger than your Sasha and Malia; many are babies, like mine, held in their parents' arms.

Perhaps, being so far removed from it, you cannot empathize with the effects of collective punishment. Having studied law and worked closely in community projects, however, you surely have an intellectual and historical understanding. I think you know that Israel's intentions extend beyond removing Hamas – or any other group that would resist an occupier's expansion and invasion of their homes and leaders.

The U.S. Constitution does not call for the punishment of an entire population simply for voting for the "wrong party." It and the Bill of Rights guarantee

Americans the freedom to express themselves freely and the right to struggle and defend their inalienable rights. The American Revolution was an act of rebellion against oppression and the denial of “self-evident” rights and freedoms.

In Gaza, we are struggling against similar oppression. Israel increasingly confines and punishes us for our struggle, as we use whatever meager means we have to attain the same freedom and human dignity your forbearers fought for.

“Do Americans like us? Does Obama like us?”

What is the bond that binds U.S. politics and power to Israel’s ongoing cruel oppression? How can the U.S. justify its unconditional patronage of Israel escalating infliction of pain upon innocent others? What satisfaction and reward does Israel gain for punishing every aspect of human life for nearly two million good Palestinian people in Gaza, who just want their freedom again?

Three recent wars have whipped, beaten and left homeless many families who are still waiting for short- and long-term protection from cruelty. I met with Ahmed Al Kafarneh, an elderly man of dignity, living with his wife, son, daughter-in-law and three grandchildren. Before the 51-day war in 2014, he, like 100,000 other Palestinians, had built a beautiful home after 20 years of working in Israel – no easy task indeed. Now everything is gone, and he lives with his extended family in a rusty metal shipping container.

Mr. President, it is a cold and wet winter here – the coldest in years. Try to imagine yourself, Michelle, Sasha and Malia sitting on cold metal floors with rain dripping in from more holes in the container roof than you can count.

Are you not the same president who, when proclaiming Israel’s right to defend itself, vowed that you would do everything to protect your children? Does that same determination to protect not apply to our Palestinian children?

It seems you have forgotten our right – not only as Palestinians, but as human beings – to exist in freedom and safety from oppression and disproportionately heavy attacks from the Israeli military. In Gaza, our youngest generation knows only war, displacement, loss, trauma and pain. It faces even more obstacles in the path of “Yes we can” in the form of massive unemployment, repression and isolation caused by Israel’s U.S.-sanctioned economic blockade, denying an entire people free movement and a normal life of choices.

Does that not sound like slavery, Mr. President?

We are locked behind walls, contained like cattle, spied on by armed drones, with Israeli-army snipers patrolling barbed-wire fences, and placed on a “diet” meted out by occupiers and thieves. Is that not extremism? Would you not resist

it?

A few days ago, I met with 13 brave and dedicated U.S. doctors who came here to assist the local hospitals – a rare occasion when American doctors get to meet face to face with our own courageous doctors and Hippocratic Oath colleagues. A 24-year-old Palestinian fine arts student paused when she heard of the delegation and asked, “Do Americans like us? Does Obama like us?”

This is why I am writing this open letter to you, Mr. President.

Human beings, of all generations, live here in Gaza, waiting for your replies to these questions. “Change we can believe in,” Mr. President – but it must include our freedom of choice.

Gaza is the size of Manhattan Island. We are human beings like you and your fellow Americans – but we are trapped behind walls and fences we have never lived behind before and don’t want to wake up to tomorrow. Our southern borders are now fenced off by Egypt, locking down Rafah crossing. To the west, our beaches – frequented by children, families and fishermen – are threatened by Israeli naval vessels armed with missiles and water cannons. They confine our fishing boats to 6 nautical miles offshore instead of the designated 20 nautical miles.

Are you aware that 73 Palestinian fishermen were fired upon and arrested in 2015? Or that 55 percent of Gazans suffer from clinical depression, that 43 percent are unemployed, 40 percent fall below the poverty line, and 60 percent are food insecure? Do you know how few hours of electricity we are allowed in 24 hours, with no power for 12 to 16 hours?

The same shortage applies to water, cooking gas and many other basic essentials. As you are served your meal this evening, remember we have half a million gas cylinders waiting to be filled before we can cook or boil water for washing and drinking (a human right).

This is all the more tragic because Gaza could be the perfect neighbor for Israel, living in peace and harmony and sharing mutually beneficial economic and trade relationships. We have many skilled workers and a well-educated young generation. Palestine has always been progressive. The only thing we need is a chance to grow, develop and contribute with dignity and equality.

We want to build bridges of understanding, instead of separation walls of bigotry and hatred. We don’t want Israel experimenting with its new hi-tech weapons on the children of Gaza. Your American-made missiles have been used to attack U.N. schools and shelters – the very schools which offer quality education and steer our children away from extremism. This is usually something

to be applauded, not targeted.

You have not seen Khuza'a and the massive destruction that Israel's war machine left behind. Its children's feet are cold this frigid winter because water continues to drip from their shell-pocked ceilings onto their beds. You are welcome to visit us at any time, should you choose to place humanitarian considerations over political ones.

It is time for you, Mr. President, to provide the children and youth of Gaza with hope they can believe in. You can do it before you leave office, and all your promises, behind. You can reignite the enthusiasm we felt when you stepped up to address the world, and strengthen your legacy for promoting peace after you leave the Oval Office.

Meanwhile, you are among the very few people on earth who could influence Israel and Egypt to open borders and end the collective blockade. Is not a decade enough? Especially when we know that the ones who suffer from the siege are ordinary people, not political groups such as Hamas. If the aim is for people to look beyond Hamas, they must be given options for the future.

The children and parents of Gaza are waiting for a solution, and you can revitalize the positive energy that came with you and your speeches early in your presidency. Make all people proud – including Americans – of your long-lasting achievements.

Stand up for Gaza, as you always do for Israel, regardless of how badly they treat their fellow man (including yourself). We don't want or need extremism in any form. We want stability, peace and to live in our homes without drones and tanks threatening us day and night. The young people of Gaza are seeking a better future.

Can we do this? Yes, we can! Step up Mr. President—please.

Award-winning journalist Mohammed Omer reports from the Gaza Strip. Follow him on Twitter: @MoGaza. [This letter was adapted from an article in Washington Report on Middle East Affairs.]
