

The Release of Palestinian Prisoners - A step toward Peace

By Dr. Peter Demant & Zoughbi Zoughbi

At first it was suggested to write two separate articles, but later agreed that one article and one voice might be best. Writing of the article was no easy task. At the onset, there was one thing both sides could agree on- the Palestinian could not make the Israeli be a Palestinian, and vice versa. Both sides had their own viewpoints that could not be forfeited. Unfortunately, those viewpoints usually came into resistance of each other. It took over 6 weeks of back and forth discussions to come to an article of compromise. If it weren't the specific wording, it was that it was mentioned in the first place. The process became very frustrating, to the point that it would have made more sense to have quit and just walk away, than to try to continue. Both sides remained committed throughout the differences to come to a small point of common ground.

The issue of the Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli jails has become a heated topic in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. Many of the 2500 Palestinian prisoners are kept in small, overcrowded cells, and are routinely maltreated. Most are serving lengthy sentences for minor offenses (e.g. throwing stones at soldiers or organizing political demonstrations), while a few are condemned for committing more serious acts, often described as "having Jewish blood in their hands". Palestinians voice that all political prisoners should be released immediately in accordance with the Oslo and Wye agreements. Israelis are hesitant to agree because they consider the prisoners to be criminal and a threat to security. Meanwhile, pressures to release Jewish prisoners with "Arab blood in their hands" have been raising. Facing this complex situation and given the importance of humanitarian gestures as confidence building measures, we want jointly to seek forward- looking for constructive ways of addressing it.

Over the past years the conflict between Israel and Palestine has been plagued with mutual violence on both sides, with many deaths incurred. Palestinians are striving for freedom and their right to exist with peace and justice- even under the abnormal conditions of having no state of their own. Israelis continue to demand a stable security for themselves by creating borders, walls, and fences between themselves and Palestinians. If one is to be secure by building walls, then one must build them higher. But, if one truly wants to have inclusive security for everyone- then one must make friends with all the surrounding neighbors without walls. Continued violence is not the way toward peace. Violence or any aggressive acts on either side can not be condoned, if 'Peace' is going to be more than just a word.

Netanyahu, through the Wye talks, agreed to the liberation of 750 Palestinian political prisoners. However, he released mostly common criminals, keeping political activists incarcerated. It has become a widespread reaction to label the actions of those who fight for their freedom criminal. However, under the abnormal and frustrating conditions of the oppressive state, fighting for freedom sometimes may lead to violence on the side of the oppressed. Israel has made it a standard practice to label Palestinians who commit violent acts as- "terrorists". However, Israeli soldiers who perpetrate unjustified violent acts are labeled as "just doing their job" Settlers deliberately going on a rampage are "deranged".

The Oslo Accords of 1993, held promise of a slow road toward peace. Unfortunately, the terms of agreement were not completely adhered to. As a result, the extreme 'rejectionist of peace' wings among both Israelis and Palestinians have continued to commit violent acts without compromise. We consider important, at this stage, to release at least those political prisoners who were accused of violent acts before the Peace Accords. Israel should, somewhere along the way - preferably rather than later - agree to liberate before the completion of their term also post-1993 Palestinian prisoners.

In proposing a mutually acceptable policy, two starting points must be that (1) the more Palestinian political prisoners Israel liberates, the better it is for peace, and (2) the more prisoners Palestinians can get liberated the better: an all-or-nothing approach is not recommended. Even the worst of conflicts, are open to a solution. Enemies become adversaries, adversaries- sometimes- partners. Absolute demands give way to historical compromise. And in the uneasy transition from war to peace, amnesty for prisoners becomes an issue. Fewer prisoners in jail means fewer embittered families, less resentment and hatred, improved preconditions for normalization between our peoples. Perhaps there is a way to focus on our common concern, which is to ensure the release of both Arab and Jewish prisoners would they individually solemnly pledge not to use or advocate violence: this would also produce a tension reduction effect in their respective societies.

Many Palestinians who were formerly involved using violence, now subscribe to the 'peace' effort. What was a justified, even inevitable tool at a time when there was no recognition or negotiation, becomes a counterproductive means of struggle. Releasing political prisoners is beneficial for peace; it is one step closer by building a bridge of trust. A pragmatic approach means that Palestinians may demand liberation of all prisoners, but will accept gradual, but steady release over time.

There is no road to true reconciliation unless the needs of both sides are met with security for all. Hopefully Israel will release the prisoners and pave a road toward peace because it wants to, not because it has to for practical reasons. After the last political prisoner is released, Israelis and Palestinians will need to work through the past century of bloodshed, and

endeavor together toward peace through justice. Peace-oriented Palestinians and Israelis should already now start thinking together on how to achieve people-to-people reconciliation, lest political prisoners be liberated but we all remain the prisoners of our past.

This article was written jointly between an Israeli (Dr. Peter Demant) and a Palestinian (Zoughbi Zoughbi), who both represent organizations working in partnership on the HEAL (Healing Early Action Link) project. HEAL is supported through FAFO as a people-to-people project.

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