

## **Chapitre 7/Chapter 7**

# **People's Power in Gaza**

**Ramzy Baroud**

In a radio interview prior to the US invasion of Iraq, David Barsamian asked Noam Chomsky what ordinary Americans could do to stop the war. Chomsky answered, "In some parts of the world people never ask, 'what can we do?' They simply do it."

For someone who was born and raised in a refugee camp in Gaza, Chomsky's seemingly oblique response required no further elucidation.

When Gazans recently stormed the strip's sealed border with Egypt, Chomsky's comment returned to mind, along with memories of the still relevant - and haunting - past.

In 1989, the Bureej refugee camp was experiencing a strict military curfew, as punishment for the killing of one Israeli soldier. The soldier's car had broken down in front of the camp while he was on his way home to a Jewish settlement. Bureej had previously lost hundreds of its people to the Israeli army and killing the soldier was an unsurprising act of retaliation.

In the weeks that followed, scores of Palestinians in Bureej were murdered and hundreds of homes were demolished. The killing spree generated little media coverage in Israel.

I lived with my family in an adjacent refugee camp, Nuseirat, at the time. Characterised by extreme poverty, it was a natural home for much of the Palestinian resistance movement. Our house was located a few feet away from what was known as the 'Graveyard of the Martyrs'. It was an area of high elevation that the local children often used to watch the movement of Israeli tanks as they began their daily incursion into the camp. We whistled or yelled every time we spotted the soldiers, and used sign language to communicate as we hid behind the simple graves.

Although watching, yelling and whistling were the only means of response at our disposal, they were far from safe. My friends Ala, Raed, Wael and others were all killed in these daily encounters

During Bureej's most lethal curfew yet, the sound of explosions coming from the doomed camp reached us at Nuseirat. The people of my camp became engulfed in endless discussions which were neither factional nor theoretical. People were being brutally murdered, injured or impoverished, while the Red Cross was blocked access to the camp. Something had to be done.

And all of a sudden it was. Not as a result of any polemic endorsed by intellectuals or 'action calls' initiated at conferences, but as an unstructured, spur-of-the-moment act undertaken by a few women in my refugee camp. They simply started a march into Bureej, and were soon joined by other women, children and men. Within an hour, thousands of refugees made their way into the besieged neighbouring camp. "What's the worst they could do?" a neighbour asked, trying to collect his courage before joining the march. "The soldiers will not be able to kill more than a hundred before we overpower them."

Israeli soldiers stood dumbfounded before the chanting multitudes. While many marchers were wounded only one was killed. The soldiers eventually retreated to their barricades. UN vehicles and Red Cross ambulances sheltered themselves amidst the crowd and together they broke the siege.

I still remember the scene of Bureej residents first opening the shutters of their windows, then carefully cracking their doors, stepping out of their homes in a state of disbelief breaking into joy. My memory - of the chants, the tears, the dead being rushed to be

buried, the wounded hauled on the many hands that came to the rescue, the strangers sharing food and good wishes -reaffirms the event as one of the greatest acts of human solidarity I have witnessed.

The scene was to be repeated time and again, during the first and Second Palestinian Uprising: ordinary people carrying out what seemed like an ordinary act in response to extraordinary injustice.

The father who lost his son to free Bureej told the crowd: “I am happy that my son died so that many more could live.”

Later than day, our refugee camp fell under a most strict military curfew, to relive Bureej’s recent nightmare. We were neither surprised nor regretful. We had known the right thing to do and “we simply did it.”

Now Palestinian women, once more, have led Palestinian civil society in a most meaningful and rewarding way. Just when Israeli defence minister Ehud Barak was being congratulated for successfully starving Palestinians in Gaza to submission, ordinary women led a march to break the tight siege imposed on Gaza.

On Tuesday, January 22, they descended on the Gaza-Egypt border and what followed was a moment of pride and shame: pride for those ever-dignified people refusing to surrender, and shame that the so-called international community allowed the humiliation of an entire people to the extent that forced hungry mothers to brave batons, tear gas and military police in order to perform such basic acts as buying food, medicine and milk.

The next day, the courage of these women inspired the same audacity that the original batch of women in my refugee camp inspired nearly twenty years ago. Nearly half of the Gaza Strip population crossed the border in a collective push for mere survival. And when people march in unison, there is no worldly force, however deadly, that can block their way.



At first, on Jan. 22, Egyptian police tried to stop the Palestinians from crossing the wall they had broken through. But the people of Gaza weren’t having it, and soon the police stepped back and watched. Photo: Khalil

This “largest jailbreak in history”, as one commentator described it, will be carved in Palestinian and world memory for years to come. In some circles it will be endlessly analysed, but for Palestinians in Gaza, it is beyond rationalization: it simply had to be done.

Armies can be defeated but human spirit cannot be subdued. Gaza’s act of collective courage is one of the greatest acts of civil disobedience of our time, akin to civil rights marches in America during the 1960’s, South Africa’s anti-Apartheid struggle, and more recently the protests in Burma.

Palestinian people have succeeded where politics and thousands of international appeals have failed. They took matters into their own hands and they prevailed. While this is

hardly the end of Gaza's suffering, it's a reminder that people's power to act is just too significant to be overlooked.

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