

A Tribute to Eyad al-Sarraj¹

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Over 20 years ago I encountered a woman in a refugee camp in Gaza whom I have never forgotten. It was a painfully brief encounter, ending as imperceptibly as it began. I was walking in the camp with some male friends when a woman unexpectedly approached me. She took my arm and pulled me toward her, and said to me, “I have nothing left to feed my children but black milk. What good am I?” Before I could respond—clearly at a loss as to how—or think to hold onto her hand, which was momentarily fastened to my arm, she disappeared into the camp, evaporating, it seemed, into an expanse of dust and air. I stood there stunned, trying to understand what had just happened, tears welling in my eyes. My friends, clearly embarrassed by the encounter, simply dismissed her as someone pitiable, even crazy.

When I was asked to write this tribute to Eyad I immediately thought of this woman whom I shall call Nadia, and my few, searing moments with her. To this day, I wish Eyad had been with me that day in the camp; he would not have been ashamed by Nadia as my male friends apparently were, but would have reached out to her and embraced her, offering the comfort she so desperately needed.

By now much has been written about Eyad—his background, his work and his many professional achievements and honors. I shall not repeat what others have said. Rather, I want to share some personal experiences with this remarkable man—one of which I have never before revealed—that powerfully express who he was.

I met Eyad in the summer of 1985 during my first visit to Gaza. I was there to do fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation on American economic assistance to the Palestinians in the occupied territories. I was urged to meet Dr. al-Sarraj whom, I was told, was the only psychiatrist in the Gaza Strip. He was also the director of the mental health service in Gaza’s Department of Health, which was under the control of the Israeli authorities. Our first meeting was at the Marna House, a small hotel where I was staying. Eyad walked into the parlor of the hotel and I remember a tall, handsome man whose presence filled the room. We spent a long time talking although I do not remember for how long. What I do remember was his fierce honesty and the absence of any sense of caution or tentativeness. Where others were initially (and understandably) careful in speaking with me—a foreigner whom they did not know—Eyad was open, direct and resolute.

I did not see much of Eyad that summer but that changed when I returned to Gaza in early 1986 to do additional fieldwork for a study of conditions in the Gaza Strip for the West Bank Data Base Project, under the direction of Meron Benvenisti. One sector I was tasked to describe was health

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and I very much wanted to visit Shifa Hospital, then Gaza's main hospital run by the Israeli military government. However, the Israeli authorities prohibited access to Shifa by foreigners and the only way one could enter was with official permission, which was rarely granted. I called Eyad, hoping he might have some needed influence with the military administration. He listened to me and told me he would meet me at Marna House the following morning. I assumed it was to discuss how best to approach the authorities for permission. When Eyad showed up at Marna House he greeted me warmly and we had the following exchange:

“Let's go, Sara.”

“Let's go where,” I asked?

“Shifa.”

“Shifa? You mean you got me permission?”

“No, you will never get permission and when you are inside the hospital you will understand why. I shall bring you in because you must see for yourself the conditions in the hospital.”

“Eyad, you could get into serious trouble with the authorities. You might lose your job. I don't want you to take such risks for me and I am not asking you to.”

“I am not worried. But you must write about what you see, about everything I show you.”

At considerable risk to himself—and it was only later, from others, that I learned how great the risk actually was—Eyad surreptitiously brought me into Shifa, walking me through the entire hospital including the operating room. He allowed me to take as much time as I needed despite the worried looks of the hospital staff. He did not say too much but he did not have to; conditions inside the hospital were appalling as the following excerpt from my published report, *The Gaza Strip Survey*, shows:

Mice, roaches and other insects were observed scurrying through individual wards, rooms and bathrooms. Rooms were extremely dirty and in a state of decay as indicated by broken windows, peeling paint and cracked floors. Hospital beds were old and rusting and patients were observed two to a bed, lying on sheets that were torn and blood-stained. Hospital personnel indicated that the same sheets are often used for more than one patient due to a lack of supplies. Rooms are cleaned only when patients can afford to pay . . . The surgical operating room [was] in a similar state of deterioration and extremely unsterile; cigarette butts were observed on the floor of the [OR].²

² Sara Roy, *The Gaza Strip Survey* (Jerusalem: The West Bank Data Base Project and the Jerusalem Post Press, 1986), p. 109.

This one paragraph caught the attention of the international media and a firestorm ensued including a four-minute segment on life inside Gaza on the ABC evening news. Eyad told me that the Palestinian director of the hospital was fired and that hospital conditions soon improved but only temporarily. After Shifa was cleaned up and repaired, the military government invited various international groups and organizations into the hospital as a way of refuting my claims. The Knesset even threatened to subpoena Meron and me since they accused us of having been paid by the PLO to write the report!

I was often asked how I got access to the hospital, which I never revealed until now. I remember receiving a call in Boston from a senior official at the American embassy in Tel Aviv, who, surprised that I managed to get inside Shifa, asked me whether I had seen dogs running through the hospital as he had when he was last there. Many people thanked me for exposing the conditions in Shifa but it was Eyad who was truly responsible for doing so.

Eyad was an extremely principled man and he did not fear retribution for actions he believed in. I remember another time, years later, sitting with him in the garden of his home. It was the spring of 1996, and not long before he had been appointed the commissioner general of the Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights. Eyad was very upset about the behavior of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and its increasingly flagrant abuse of human rights. But what outraged him the most, it seemed to me, was the facile, almost effortless nature of the PA's abuse, the ease with which they oppressed their own people, and the total lack of remorse that defined their abuse. His anger was palpable but so were his pain and the feeling that his beloved Gaza had been betrayed once again. He told me how he was going to publicly expose the PA in an effort to initiate a process of reform. I remember feeling anxious and tense, fearing, I told him, his arrest and possible torture, which is what subsequently happened. Eyad, however, remained consistent and unwavering, telling me, "Silence is not an option."

In the near three decades of our friendship, I came to know Eyad very well. There are few people for whom I had more respect, admiration and affection. I always learned from his example. He was, as others have written, long and deeply committed to addressing trauma, especially in children, and to protecting and honoring the dignity of the individual irrespective of religion or nationality. For me, Eyad's most important legacy lies in one fundamental belief, which animated his life: while resistance to oppression can assume many forms, the most powerful form of resistance resides in maintaining one's humanity in the presence of cruelty and in seeking that humanity in others including in one's oppressors. Such resistance, he believed, can never be extinguished.

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