

Gaza's Agony

A year after the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip, Palestinians are still waiting for President Obama's deeds to match his rhetoric in the Middle East.

BY EYAD EL-SARRAJ | JANUARY 28, 2010



On the night Barack Obama won the U.S. presidency, he **announced**: "To all those ... who are huddled around radios in the forgotten corners of the world ... a new dawn of American leadership is at hand. To those who would tear the world down: We will defeat you. To those

who seek peace and security: We support you.... The true strength of our nation comes not from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity, and unyielding hope."

Obama's words made the world shiver with anticipation.



[COMMENTS \(3\)](#)SHARE:

[Digg](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Reddit](#)



[More...](#)

One year later, anticipation has turned to disappointment. The U.S. president's first State of the Union address coincides roughly with the anniversary of the end of Operation Cast Lead, the devastating Israeli military offensive on Gaza last winter. And yet Obama said nothing. During that assault, shuddering under ordnance dropped or fired by American-made F-16s, we Palestinians felt abandoned by the soon-to-be president. We recalled the words of Martin Luther King Jr., who maintained, "History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."

The sting of the White House's ongoing silence is devastating. Obama has remained a passive bystander as Israel has declared a faux freeze of settlements, arrested nonviolent civil society leaders, and denied desperate Palestinians, living in woeful conditions in Gaza, the basic necessities of livelihood.

Visitors to Gaza -- those few permitted in by Israel and Egypt -- are horrified at the scale of the human toll and widespread destruction. U.N. Justice Richard Goldstone concluded that war crimes might have been committed. Yet Obama has only broken his silence to defend Israeli war crimes by stifling the [Goldstone report](#).

During Obama's presidential campaign, he visited the Israeli city of Sderot and had no qualms about [declaring his solidarity](#) with Israelis terrified by Palestinian rocket fire. "If somebody was sending rockets into my house where my two daughters sleep at night, I'm

going to do everything in my power to stop that. And I would expect Israelis to do the same thing."

I wonder what his advice would be to a helpless father in Gaza who cannot protect his children from the American-made weaponry that killed more than 300 innocent Palestinian children. What would he say to the Palestinian grandmother ejected in 1948 by Israel and prohibited from returning to the agricultural land that could feed her stunted grandchildren?

In June, Obama [stated in Cairo](#), "America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own." But as each day goes by, Gaza slips into the hands of extremists, and the struggle for an equitable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis is being lost.

e reason is not Islam and not Hamas. The principal reason that a just solution to the conflict is fading is Israel's ongoing resort to military force in Gaza and the West Bank. Hamas respected the June 2008 truce until Israel provoked renewed rocket fire with an incursion into Gaza on Nov. 4, 2008, the day of the U.S. presidential election, killing six people. Less than two months later, Israel chose to launch its devastating war rather than negotiate a new cease-fire. This does nothing to encourage the moderates within Hamas, who are there and well worth approaching and sounding out.

Last week, Hamas met all factional leaders and asked for a complete halt to all rocket fire from the Palestinian side, so as not to give Israel a fresh excuse to start a new war. Hamas should and will recognize an Israeli state -- as Aziz Dweik, the Hamas speaker of the parliament, said last week -- once Israel recognizes a Palestinian state on the 1967 lines with East Jerusalem as its capital. Israeli governments have never accepted such an outcome yet have continually demanded that brutalized Palestinians show moderation.

The fundamental reason the opportunity for peace is slipping away is because Israeli extremists in the government and military are striving to prevent the birth of a Palestinian state. They want Palestinian land, but without the Palestinians. These Palestinians are to be cordoned off in Bantustans or made so miserable they leave for other countries.

The reconciliation of Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip, with Fatah -- which rules parts of the West Bank but is absent from Jerusalem -- is crucial to reaching a negotiated settlement. While we Palestinians must do more to put our own house in order, we should be assisted by a U.S. policy that no longer pits Palestinian against Palestinian in the ancient game of divide and rule. With Palestinians divided, Israel feels no pressure to negotiate in good faith. Yet further delay only leads to more Israeli facts on the ground -- the very facts that might well make a two-state outcome impossible.

Obama should resolve to govern using the same principles that won the hearts of the American people and raised a glimmer of hope in the Arab world. In the Middle East, he should step off the sidelines and into action. Israel rules by the gun and will turn itself into an apartheid state if left to its own devices. The far-right elements within Israel's government would prefer endless war to a just peace that requires Israel to abandon its settlement project. These forces must be identified, publicly rebuked, and stopped.

It is imperative that Obama help Israel's leaders to understand that security cannot be achieved by the gun, but only by readiness to accept me, a Palestinian, as an equal human being with equal rights.

[◀ PREVIOUS](#) 2

READ

[MOST
COMMENTED](#)