

Gaza Writes Back

by Michael Neuroth
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Over the past couple weeks, the world has watched as the always simmering conflict between Israel and Palestine has escalated - from increasing violence, detentions, kidnappings, killings, Gazan rockets into Israeli towns, and Israeli military attacks in Gaza. Hundreds of rockets have landed in Israeli towns inciting undeniable fear. More than a hundred Palestinians have been killed so far by Israeli incursions -- many of them civilians. Both sides blame the other for this escalation, and both bear responsibility for it in different ways. Although the ultimate decision for peace rests on Palestinians and Israelis, the international community also bears responsibility for allowing on going violence, denials of human rights, and a dehumanizing occupation to continue for decades. More must be done to pressure governments to bring both sides again to the negotiating table in search of a just and durable peace.

In times like these when such hatred and destruction mounts, it is difficult to have hope that the cycle of retribution will end.

Yet, we know there is hope. Many Israelis and Palestinians are working to end the cycle of violence and build peace and reconciliation. For years, cross border projects and sports programs have worked to bring youth together to challenge stereotypes and heal wounds. A circle of bereaved Palestinian and Israeli parents meet regularly, sharing their grief and calling an end to retribution.

In recent weeks, the actions and words of two families received national attention. The families of Naftali Fraenkel and Mohammed Abu Khdeir, two Israeli and Palestinian teens who were murdered, have inspired many. These families have reached out to one another, responding to their grief with love and a call to common humanity. Naftali's uncle told the Israeli press, "the life of an Arab is equally precious to that of a Jew. Blood is blood, and murder is murder ..."

Palestinian youth also have sought ways to end the cycle of violence. A few months ago I met with a group of young Gazan writers who contributed to a collection of essays titled *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza, Palestine*. These youth found solace in writing fiction, in expressing in their own voices the pain they experience as Palestinians, and specifically the loss and destruction endured during the 2008-2009 “Operation Cast Lead” which killed more than 1,400 Palestinians. Gaza is small, just twice the size of Washington DC, and 50 percent of its population is under the age of 15. The impact such violence is having on youth in Gaza is particularly troubling. Yet these young people have found ways to turn anger into inspiration, using writing as a way of resistance, hope, and peace.

Such actions of compassion by grieving Israeli and Palestinian parents and expressions of hope and courage by Gazan youth remind us that peace is possible when cycles of retribution end, common humanity acknowledged, and anger is turned toward non-violent expressions. As we continue to pray and act for peace, let us also challenge the dominant narratives of endless violence by sharing stories of hope. Let us remind our leaders and ourselves there is another way. To shift the political will of those in power, we must not only advocate for policy change -- we also must share stories of hope, forgiveness and love that can help us and our leaders see a way forward. Let us search for and lift up such courageous examples of hope and be inspired by them to build a more peaceful future.

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