**The orphans of Gaza**

Elizabeth West

Friday, Feb 09, 2024

I’ve a bee in my bonnet when it comes to the children of Gaza, and so far, have not found any means to swat it away. The buzzing is making me a little crazy. This may be a very good thing…

Here’s the background on that bee. The official death toll in Gaza is now nearing 28,000. Of that figure, accrued in just 122 days, about 70 per cent were women and children, and a goodly portion of the rest were non-combatant males. Just under half the population of Gaza — prior to the current massacre — were kids. By my estimate, that would add up to these totals: about 20,000 individual women and children killed, of whom more than 11,000 would have been youths.

These numbers — 28,000 dead, 20,000 women and children lost, 11,600 kids killed — are ciphers, little bits of fact that are supplied to us, but which fall profoundly short of describing the carnage. They are nothing more than snapshots of the Israeli-wrought destruction, devoid of any hint of the vast humanity lost, the complexity, the richness, the wisdom, the stories–small and large.

The tiny victims we see, white-shrouded, being lamented and then piled into mass graves, were children. They were not Hamas, nor were they PIJ. They never voted. For anyone. They never plotted against the Zionist occupiers. They were never in a position to participate in a coup against Hamas, as many Westerners seem to feel the Gazans ought to have done — and for which Israel insists they are culpable, deserving of their own deaths.

These juvenile fatalities are fairly well reported; it is no secret that the deaths point to massive war crimes.

That said, here is the bee itself: there are other groups of kids whose plight is of equal and possibly even more pressing concern. To begin with, there are the children heartbreakingly labeled WCNSF, or ‘Wounded Child, No Surviving Family.’ Some of these kids have lost entire extended families along with their own eyes, legs, arms, hands, feet and voices. Next, there are those who have survived with bodies as-of-yet intact, but who are all alone in a world with little food or water or shelter, where bombs rain from the sky, and familiar landmarks are reduced to rubble each day.

The total death count to date — 28,000 — comprises innumerable mothers and fathers, uncles, grandparents, aunts, and older siblings. The very people who would naturally care for the most vulnerable, the children. The ones who would procure food and water and blankets for them, nurse them when they fall ill. The people who would help them locate a center of sanity in the midst of this complete madness. Who would love them–arguably the most essential element to meaningful survival–even while every other aspect of their lives is shattered. The Israelis are not just eradicating people, they are destroying the very vital social networks that we all count on to allow our young to survive and thrive, physically and emotionally.

I find myself wondering: what happens to these children? According to UNICEF, there are now about 19,000 orphans in Gaza. The organization Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, chaired by Richard Falk, puts that number closer to 25,000. Cold hard figures again, but for some context, can we try to imagine the unimaginable? Think of every single child in Lansing, Michigan violently orphaned in a matter of just four months, and then consider the magnitude of that loss. Add in widespread displacement, homelessness, war and famine, and a sense of what the number really means begins to emerge.

Let’s start with the physical needs: where will they live? Who will care for them? Who will raise them? We are looking at a huge contingent of children who need places to live. Family, including extended family, are the universally preferred options for children who have lost their parents. But for many of these kids, all vestiges of family have been wiped out.

Not only are their families gone, but they are almost certainly traumatized in ways and to an extent we have limited experience in addressing. Given that some solution will at length be found to house and feed them, who, then, will help them find a way to get out of bed each morning, learn to sing again, play with others, swim without fear in their beautiful sea?

Children are resilient, it is frequently noted, and perhaps truly, but no one should just bounce back from what these kids have endured. The human mind and heart are not made to do that. These children, if they survive the genocide, are going to need great quantities of various kinds of support in order to keep on living

with some sense of purpose and dignity. The buzzing says: I should be working on how to provide

this help.

When I spoke recently with Zeiad Abbas Shamrouch, Executive Director at the Middle East Children’s Alliance (MECA), he acknowledged the breadth of the challenge posed by the needs of the orphans of Gaza, but expressed a position he said was shared by most organizations dedicated to the well-being of Palestinian children: Just let us do the first action to stop the genocide, and then we can discuss what is needed next. For now, he explained, MECA workers in Gaza are intent on getting adequate food, water and shelter to all of Gaza’s children, as well as those who care for them. MECA, like so many NGOs concerned with Palestinian welfare, is very sensibly laser-focused on saving lives today. Only after the immediate and lethal threats are neutralized will they be at liberty to turn their attention fully toward helping Gazans heal and rebuild.

Most of us–myself and those reading this — are citizens of countries that have actively aided and abetted this slaughter. Our tax dollars have purchased the bombs, and our elected leaders have winked and nodded at Netanyahu and his accomplices as they spew racist and genocidal hatred, meanwhile orchestrating the massacre. Biden — as we all know — went beyond the winking to commit that odious embrace. Just recently, a number of our governments defunded UNRWA (based on rock-solid ‘evidence’ from the ever-mendacious IDF and Shin Bet), further endangering Gaza’s children at a critical moment when famine and disease are rampant.

It’s true, and worth noting, that many of us are doing what we can to stop or slow the killing. We are organizing, marching, getting arrested and clogging the courts, insisting that our voices be heard in the AIPAC-infiltrated halls of government.

Excerpted: ‘The Orphans of Gaza’. Courtesy: Counterpunch.org