

# A Letter to (the Late) Saeb Erakat



By Sari Khoury

**D**

ear Dr. Erakat,

I wish I could get a glimpse of the insights and new perspectives you likely have from where you are now. But for now, I hope you will bear with me, listening, as I

raise some of the questions that weigh most heavily on my mind. The entire situation seems so absurd: Morocco has now joined the Trump bandwagon of Arab countries that have normalized ties with Israel, and the US government has in return given its recognition of Moroccan “ownership” over Western Sahara... imagine?! One signature is all it takes, and Morocco receives some 260,000 square kilometers of sparsely populated territory with fish-rich waters and oil and natural gas fields yet to be fully explored. Did you know that Morocco has built a wall to “protect” itself from the Polisario? It is about 2,500 kilometers long, dotted with minefields and military fortifications, and practically built entirely in Western Sahara. It started as a project in the early 1980s and was completed in 1987 – aided by Israeli advisers (among others). Our “authority” had little to say; you were perhaps one of its more vocal members. I certainly have nothing to say about it.

I visited Marrakech in 2009. There, in the old *souq*, I observed a group of Israeli tourists with a Hebrew-speaking guide, all of them conversing casually in Hebrew; they seemed quite happy and relaxed. I then understood that terms such as “recognition,” “diplomatic relations,” and “travel visas” mean different things to different people. A shopkeeper who heard me speaking Arabic welcomed me and asked where I am from. When I answered, “Al-Quds,” he replied, “Welcome to Morocco, your second home! Please come in, let us offer you some tea.” As I walked out, I thanked him and then headed east, looking towards Jerusalem and remembering the familiar term “strategic depth.” This phrase denotes a depth expressed through solidarity by society but offered only lip service by politicians. In practice, Palestinians face many difficulties when trying to acquire visitor visas to Arab countries.

“Israel will never gain peace until...” I wonder if in death a person sheds the confidence of mere mortals in return for the clarity of the divine. I am a quarter century younger than you and I don’t really sense that I have much time left on this earth. For a quarter century, I have also been reading the newspaper, in which, as a Palestinian, I still find nothing to be hopeful about; the headlines and statements are all the same. As an architect who’s adept at reading “pattern,” I can confidently tell you that Israel has thrived and continues to thrive much more in the context of “dynamic tension” rather than in an environment of “peace.”

I am writing to you because, like most Palestinians, I have serious doubts about the “negotiations process.” I write to you because, like most Palestinians, I seem to place more hope in deceased politicians to actually listen to us than the politicians still amongst us – and after all, listening is the primary skill of a negotiator. I do not envy the difficulty of the negotiator’s post you held. Nor do I wish to be in the position of being entrapped in what is probably the most complex example of a military occupation known to man, with a hypocritical international community that preaches international law while their own histories speak of great atrocities against humanity, and a so-called authority that is becoming less and less progressive and more reminiscent of a traditional autocratic regime where decisions are seemingly improvised and in the hands of the privileged few. But in the meantime, I wish to share how an ordinary Palestinian might attempt to make sense of the present scenario.

As you experienced firsthand, the Israeli occupation of Palestine is a complex system of control over a people and a land, a system designed





■ *Fall*, artwork by Randa Maddah.

with all the lessons in mind, learned from such acts of aggression that have been committed by humanity throughout history: in ancient Mesopotamia where religion, law, and trade were combined as part of a formula to achieve political power; or from Columbus and the ways in which the Spanish used slavery, religion, and military power to subjugate the indigenous populations of the Americas; even from Ottoman laws that were drafted to facilitate the confiscation of lands (“for any piece of land from which the crow of the rooster is not

heard, this land shall be declared a land without owner, and hence, state-land”). This system prefers the ancient Chinese torture method of “death by a thousand paper cuts” over the massacres of Genghis Khan, for paper cuts make little noise overseas, cause limited revolt inland, and employ the element of time to the occupier’s desired pace of political advancement. A system that has also perfected the use of social psychology as a tool of control and hence the development of predictable reactions by the occupied.

While Israel is a rather newly established state and occupying power whose first citizens arrived from all over the world, it is only natural that the new settlers carried with them the experience of those nations, their advancements in governance and science. And as the icing on their cake, they have put together a political charade of a parliament that seems to express all colors of the spectrum, giving the illusion of a multitude of political visions (hence a vibrant democracy), when almost all Israelis are practically the product of one school: military Zionism. The “dynamic tension” pursued by Israel under the guise of “peace” has allowed it to advance its own cause and subsequently strengthen its military, economic, and diplomatic positions.

Are these perceptions still relevant to you where you are now? In this world, my question as an average person is how the international community can be of actual help when these very countries have historically and even recently committed equal and even more hideous crimes against humanity? How can the Americans help ease the blockade of Gaza when they are responsible for the even longer blockade of Cuba? How can a military that has sanctioned napalm against the Vietnamese object to the use of yellow phosphorus against Gazans? How can the French – who have yet to apologize to, let alone compensate, the people of Algeria for the French occupation and colonization that lasted some 100+ years and has caused some one million murders – be of use on a legal or moral level against Israeli injustices committed against Palestinians? How are the French positioned vis-à-vis the issue of universal human rights when they

have tipped the balance towards the long-term military advantage of Israel by supplying it with weapons-grade nuclear technology? How can the British government be an honest broker when none of the atrocities it committed in many corners of the world have been addressed – and are not even discussed? Will it at least apologize for the Balfour Declaration? What about the Russians? Were they not the first to recognize Israel as a state?

Unfortunately, Israel has many examples of “precedence” in similar acts that have been committed by other nations. And yet, Palestinian representatives must address these same nation-states when they raise their voice asking for justice. And instead of answering these calls, how has the international community actually and measurably responded? Have we not, directly or indirectly, been given a kind of anesthetic and confined to bed rest since the founding of UNRWA? Can one not also consider the aid and funding agencies that have been established since the founding of the Palestinian Authority as other forms of anesthetic that have made our people bedridden beggars? If anyone wishes to claim that the budget support to the PA is cause for celebration, let it be put into perspective: the most recent annual budgets of the PA did not exceed the annual budget of a university such as Harvard, albeit with much less efficiency or measurable outcomes. In any case, the peace process that the negotiations office claims to tackle under the auspices of the international community has produced counterproductive results; indeed, you were more familiar with the shrinking map of the Palestinian Territories than most of us.

Yes, all this you knew. But as a negotiator, and with possibly a wider perspective from where you are now, to use negotiating terminology and tactics, what has been our BATNA (best alternative to a negotiated agreement), and how can it be improved? From the

agreement... time is calculated to be in the occupier's favor.

There's another negotiating tactic that, in my opinion, begs to be explored, namely anchoring. And the necessary advancement of our Palestinian discourse, a discourse



■ *Bomb Damage*, artwork by Banksy in Gaza. Banksy's piece mirrors a sculpture of Niobe, a Greek mythological goddess who turns into a weeping stone while mourning her murdered children.

outside (because most Palestinians are outside the realm of political discourse), it seems that Palestinians have placed all their eggs into one basket, with no viable alternative at hand. Israeli tactics, on the other hand, have gone a step further: their intention has been nothing but the alternative to a negotiated

that has not evolved beyond the use of the same mantras for decades. Israel has been more strategic in the choice of its wording. After all, the right words uttered at the right time and in the right place are powerful tools, and words such as "security," "Jewish state," "Iran," "(peace) process," and

"conflict management" have become the terms and issues around which ongoing discussions revolve, regardless of their degree of actual relevance. The discourse vis-à-vis the international community has come to focus on the anchoring terms devised by our Israeli counterpart, the most far cry of which is the supposed fear of an Iranian threat. For how can Iran actually attempt any serious military action against Israel when, on one level, Iran is surrounded by US military bases on all fronts, and on another level, it is inconceivable that Iran has anything to gain by subjecting hundreds of thousands of (Sunni) Palestinians to a potential attack that would aggravate the majority of Sunni-Muslim nations? Again, I am not a politician but an ordinary Palestinian who wishes to understand the circumstances within which we live. Should our politicians not take the time to explain things to us beyond empty slogans and repetitive statements?

So far, I have read only snippets of your book *Imam Ali bin Abi Taleb and Negotiations* (2015), where you highlight that Ali stood up for the notions of peace and justice. And in the back of my average mind, in light of the frustration of generations of Palestinians, the words of a Syrian refugee I recently met in Paris ring strongly: "Justice is a man-made concept; God knows nothing of justice." We perhaps more urgently need a book written by a Palestinian who proposes solutions to the endless Fatah-Hamas standoff. Actually, the whole internal political discourse needs to be put into a more suitable context: the PA is merely responsible for administrative services, and a functioning Legislative Council is not an arena for factional and political discord, nor are local universities and the various professional unions such an arena. Because the negotiations and our response to the political situation are responsibilities of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the PA should be a place where local representatives address the majority of Palestinian concerns regarding services and the best use of the available resources. Will anyone find any two Palestinians who would disagree on the need for a functioning economy, proper health care, or good schooling that provides youth with the proper tools to advance their collective cause and promote individual well-being?

But before any of these issues are discussed, should not our Legislative Council have long ago addressed the critical need of writing our own set of laws to replace the ones that are derived from post-colonial systems, specifically tailored to complicate the lives of the people previously occupied but still functioning under unjust and borrowed legal structures to this day? What can be said about religious identity (versus religious values) with regard to both formal and informal education? Has not the increasing role of religious identity been instrumental in unconsciously reinforcing the Zionist narrative? Has not the issue of religious identity removed thousands of years of Palestinian history from the consciousness and education of our society? How is a nation to seek liberation without a better knowledge of its own history? And would the knowledge of its own history be in any way a compromise to a people's native and traditional values? These and other issues Palestinians wish to address as well; they are



■ Eating and drinking to pass time since we're not allowed to participate in the process.

the types of issues over which we may have some control while living under occupation.

Would you find significance in the term authority, as indicated in Palestinian Authority? I think that names are strong indicators of a desired direction, and – whether or not we are conscious of it – the notion of authority has come to dominate the notion of governance in Palestine. From your higher perspective, would you advise us to adopt a more inclusive system of Palestinian governance versus a more exclusive system of Palestinian authority? One could argue why inclusivity is more constructive. But beyond all the practical reasons, there is also the notion of dignity and involvement, of citizens taking an active role in the making of their own future, of a nation's people taking responsibility for their pursuit of independence rather than being delegated to acting as mere spectators while a

few caretakers claim to be exclusively qualified for heroic missions. The age of the hero has died, and at least since the scientific revolution some 500 years ago, human advancement has been more a product of collective and organized efforts.

I will continue to read your book, hoping to find reference to the Qur'anic verses from Sura al-Shoura 38 that address "those who hearken to their Lord and establish regular prayer, who conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, who spend out of what we bestow upon them for sustenance." These verses speak of leadership by council, carried out by the collective while suggesting that a nation should spend its own riches, for in both is wise political and economic counsel. And in the words of Imam Ali, we have the duty to transmit the mantle of the struggle to future generations in a transitional and constructive manner because for "God, there is no God but He, everything perishes save His Face." In essence, if we as Palestinians keep asking the same questions and still attempt to address the same issues for another quarter of a century, we will not have advanced at all.

*Sari Khoury is a Palestinian architect from Jerusalem.*