

This is not a Revolt, This is a War

Intifada 1987



Dr Makram Khoury-Machool

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30th Anniversary of the First Palestinian Intifada

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December 2017 marks the 30th anniversary of the first Palestinian Intifada. Dr Makram Khoury-Machool was the journalist to announce the outbreak of the Intifada in *Haaretz's* supplement in Tel Aviv (Ha'ir), back in December 1987. He was shot in the face and his report became a media event.

This report, was translated into English 30 years ago (1987) by the late Prof. Israel Shahak.

This Is not a Revolt – This Is a War

A long film, whose end we cannot yet see, began with a long wait at the Gaza taxi stop in Jaffa. For an hour, not even one taxi arrived. A Gaza taxi driver who was stuck with his taxi in Jaffa was not in a hurry to take me. Even on the way he continued to hesitate:

“I don't know if I should have returned to Gaza today. We all know one thing: if Israel Radio's Arabic service says that the situation is calm, it's a sign that the opposite is true.”

Shortly after 9:30 I got out at Bayt Hanun. I had more than an hour to wait before my meeting with

the leader in the centre of Gaza City.

The streets were empty of people. After a few minutes I saw three army jeeps by the side of the road, and not far from them stood more than ten soldiers who opened fire down one of the side roads. Walking on south, toward Gaza, I passed the soldiers, and suddenly I found myself in no-man's land. From one side hundreds of demonstrators approached me, throwing Molotov cocktails, stones, and sticks. Behind me were the Israeli soldiers, who were now firing at the demonstrators.

I saw the soldiers firing the guns at their stomachs and pointed straight forward. The bullets passed by me. I heard their whistles. I had not managed to work out how to get away, when I found I was covered with blood. I felt no blow or pain. It was as if someone had poured a bottle of blood over my head. I pulled a red and white *kuffiyah* out of my bag and bandaged my head with it.

Meanwhile I moved to the side of the road, away from the centre of the conflict. A passing taxi picked me up and took me to *Shifa* Hospital in Gaza. During the whole journey, I heard bursts of fire.

At the entrance to the hospital about thirty doctors

in white gowns stood waiting for casualties. I was the first. They took me into the operating theatre, and ten doctors, including surgeons, all began to treat me at once.

One of them took my blood pressure, a second my temperature; a third checked my stomach; another connected me to an ECG machine. I was injured in the face, next to my nose. While they were stitching me up under a local anaesthetic, a lad of about 17 was brought into the hospital. He had been shot by soldiers at the incident in *Bayt Hanun*. From the operating table, I saw in the mirror the barrel of a gun waving nervously across the windowsill. The second casualty died on the operating table, right next to me.

I left the theatre straight into the hospital courtyard. Seven soldiers stood at the side and arrested all the youths who came to inquire about the condition of their wounded comrade. I decided nevertheless to try to reach the meeting place. A man was waiting for me there, and he took me to the leader.

The condition was that I should not know his name nor other identifying details such as where he lived, where and what he studied. Later I saw him in action, giving orders, receiving reports, directing

thousands of people against the army. Twice I saw IDF soldiers withdraw.

He speaks perfect literary Arabic and also good Hebrew. His speech is open and decisive, laced with figures and data. Every half hour he received up-to-date information from his people on what was going on in the Gaza Strip. Around him I saw five people who kept him supplied with news.

During the day, I was with him in various parts of Gaza and the refugee camps of *Jabalya* and *Shati'*. He always stood erect, steady, almost without moving. In every place, people were drawn to him as to a magnet. I talked with him as we walked along the paths and alleys between the houses.

The Gazans who saw me at his side asked what I was doing there. They expect that journalists, foreigners as well as Israelis, will sit in the military headquarters or travel about surrounded by 20 jeeps, take a few photographs, and leave. The leader said about this, "We told all our people not to believe the signs which say 'Foreign Press' because the settlers, the army, and the occupiers are behind them, in order to hitch a lift and get into the Strip." But despite this, he said, "The progressive Jewish journalists are the most intelligent and best people

in Israel.”

The bandage on my head broke some of the barriers of suspicion. As far as I was able to tell, he spoke to me candidly and with a great deal of honesty. “They are not really demonstrations and this is not a revolt,” is the leader’s contribution to the debate in Israel. “This is a war that continues 24 hours a day. We are working in rotation. The order was that the youngsters should go in the front, facing the fire, and they don’t hesitate to do so. They block the army’s central route. It is the first time in history that this has happened. I go through the whole Strip and instruct them in the camps. It’s not just school children. By now it includes everyone aged from nought to a hundred. Here is a 55-year-old woman who took part in the events and was hit with a stick by the soldiers. The women are not afraid.

Ninety percent of the people in Gaza belong to political groups. They don’t need instructions from anybody. In any case, people who live under occupation and oppression do not need someone else to incite them.”

How do you organize the demonstrations now?

“Once, in order to start a demonstration, we would send the children to organize a disturbance. Now,

everyone is out on the streets at 3 in the morning.

Not ten or twenty people, but hundreds. We don't have a timetable, but we already have a custom, waves of people going out, at 3 am, in the morning, at midday, early evening. From the evening until 3 am, we sleep and organize.

Sometimes, if the situation demands it, we even go out at 10 pm, because during the night, the army doesn't effectively control the streets and doesn't know the local topography, so we are in control. For instance, yesterday in *Jabalya* refugee camp, there were demonstrations all night and there was not a single soldier, even though there was a curfew. The soldiers simply fled, because thousands of people formed a sort of moving human wall, and nothing will work against something like that, neither an iron fist nor bullets.”

Aren't You Afraid?

“It is forbidden. It is simply forbidden to be afraid of anything. The occupation authorities think that if someone dies and they take the body and permit the burial only during the night, then there will not be any disturbance. But our thinking has already passed this barrier. The new system is that we snatch the body from the hospital and bury it and

turn this into a sort of spontaneous demonstration. We also forbade the doctors to give the bodies to the military authorities, and anyway the doctors are not in control of this, for we have no difficulty in snatching the bodies. For instance, in the past few days we have snatched four bodies and organized night funerals which have turned into demonstrations. Then the whole area, like *Khan Yunis* yesterday, is out on the streets. Not a single person stayed at home. Thirty-five thousand took part in that funeral. During the funeral, we injured seven soldiers. Yesterday, I made a few trips, from *Khan Yunis* to *Rafah* and from *Rafah* to *al-Burayj*. There were tens of thousands, and until 3 am the army could not break in. The distance between the Gaza sentries and the army was fifty meters, and the army simply didn't dare to come in."

In one of the side roads, someone came up to him and said that a 17-year-old boy had been murdered in *Bayt Hanun*. That was the lad who had died on the operating table next to me. All the time, he received reports, how this youth had been struck, whether with a stick or something else, on what part of the body, and where this had happened. He explained that the distribution of leaflets from any organization was forbidden, but if he wanted to he could organize the distribution of leaflets every day,

without problems [sic]. “We already know how to identify their civilian information. We feel their presence, particularly in the mornings. We have seen to it that the army does not know who the inciters are. The authorities will not see another inciter. There is an instruction, and everyone goes out, quite spontaneously. There are no single inciters.”

When I asked him about the role of the leader in directing the masses, he was modest. “No, not exactly a leader. More like a giver of order.” But the hours that I spent in his presence showed that his orders are carried out with an almost religious obedience.

This is how he sees things. “Out of 650,000 residents of the Strip, the occupying authorities have so far arrested 47,000. Every one of them is already his own leader where he lives.

The arrest creates a leader. We cause the politicization of the people, and they like this because they need it. Let no idiot think that external forces are directing what goes on inside. The people inside belong to all sorts of organizations, which are like political parties of the nascent state. Even those who do not belong to any group identify with the

overall struggle.”

Over the years, a sort of quiet hatred has developed among the residents of the Strip for their compatriots in the West Bank. They feel neglected, even forgotten. The journalists reporting on events in the territories usually set out from Jerusalem. They easily reach Ramallah or Bethlehem, but rarely get to Gaza. So the West Bank naturally gets press coverage, even when much more important things which are happening in Gaza don't find any expression in the media.

Loyalty to what is called “unity of Palestinian ranks” prevents the Gaza residents from expressing their frustration, but many of them feel that the national leadership in the West Bank looks down on them in the way town-dwellers usually regard residents of some distant province. The leader was only prepared to say these few words about the differences:

“The Gazans, if they decide to do something, carry it out to the end. The West Bank is almost paradise compared to the Gaza Strip. Even such a simple thing as a passport is denied to them. The only thing that most of them have is a refugee card.”

Perhaps this is the reason that the Gaza Strip has always been distinguished by a large measure of independent action. At the end of the 1960s, the underground groups used to organize under the umbrella of one of the Palestinian organizations, but even when contact was made with the leadership outside, it was hard to maintain it. Decisions on activities were taken in the Strip, and the residents usually got hold of the arms and sabotage materials by themselves. In recent years, it has been decided to maintain a strict separation between the armed groups and the activists considered “political.” In no case have shots been fired at the army from among the demonstrators, which should have been likely to lead to a bloodbath. The local leaders are responsible for this discipline.

“Every quarter has its own leader, who is usually some major personality. He will be known for this high political consciousness, for his charisma, and he will not have to do that much persuasion, for the situation helps him, and he will just have to give the signal. Every one of these leaders has already become a symbol. In a large quarter, there will be two or three leaders. The detainees are usually political people, who belong to an ideological current and not necessarily to a particular organization. The leader creates around himself an organized mass

which at any time can go and do whatever is necessary. In effect, we want the army. We don't demonstrate when it isn't here. We want it in order to confront it, in whatever way we can."

Referring to the efficiency of the organization, he said: "Yesterday, five hundred women went to *Bayt Hanun*, and they only knew of the planned trip five minutes before they left. The conscription of all levels of the population is in effect like a military operation. When we want to operate through the whole Strip, our short experience has taught us that within a few minutes we can block the main traffic route leading out from the Strip. When the army says that it has opened the main road, it is a lie because the road is blocked by our people."

He stressed: "It is not correct that the mosques are centre of incitement. We only use the mosque loudspeakers, nothing more. Now the whole community is united in one front. At the moment, it doesn't matter who the organizations are, even though it is known that the Popular Front is more revolutionary than *Fateh*. The basic presence on the ground is of the Popular Front and *Fateh*, though in terms of numbers, *Fateh* is bigger."

Suddenly he disappeared. I don't know where to. He

didn't say goodbye or farewell. I met him again about an hour later in *Shifa* Hospital, in which his forces had been besieged for the past five hours.

Shortly after 11 am, I arrived at the Red Cross building, in which about two hundred lawyers had been barricaded since the morning. At 11:45, they decided to go out for a silent procession to the hospital, which had filled up with casualties over the previous two hours. A strange procession in the Gaza street, many grey heads, tens of men in suits and ties and polished shoes, marching silently between the smoking tires. In the hospital courtyard, the leader received them. "Take off your ties and join in with everyone else," he told them. Some of the elderly lawyers were offended. After five minutes, they were all busily throwing stones at the soldiers surrounding the area.

A small mosque stands next to the hospital. The leader went in, put a few guards at the door, took over the loudspeakers, and let his men in. The news of the death of the boy from *Bayt Hanun* started to spread, and hundreds of people streamed toward the hospital. Within an hour, thirteen people arrived at the hospital with gunshot wounds. Among them I saw a girl who had a bullet in her bottom, and a youth injured in his arm – two holes, entry and exit

wounds of the bullet.

All of the hospital buildings were already full, thousands of people. Many of them were seeking shelter from the shooting in the streets, assuming that the army would not enter the hospital. It was hard to pass along the corridors. Shooting was heard again. Close, very close. The leader started to send his people out. The youths went out first, the adults next, and all the women behind them. The leader instructed them to pass stones from the rear to the front. A chain was formed, and a rain of stones was thrown out. After each barrage, the leader ordered, “Everyone, inside!”

The soldiers started to fire at a youth on the second floor of the east wing. He jumped into the courtyard to escape from the shots. A few soldiers came into the hospital grounds. The youth tried to escape, but saw a soldier facing him. He stopped running, stood facing the soldier, opened his shirt, bared his chest and said “Shoot!” The soldier pointed the gun at him and, from a distance of fifteen meters, fired.

This happened in front of my eyes, less than twenty meters from me. The soldier’s face is engraved in my memory. From all around shouts were heard, “Wounded! Wounded!” The shooting continued. The

leader ordered, “All the women, out, to the wounded.” They went and fetched the body and put it on a stretcher. I went into the theatre. The doctors told me that the bullet had cut a main artery. Immediately it was known that the boy was dead, masked youths came and took away the body. The soldiers withdrew about 300 meters, to *Umar al-Makhtar* Street.

The youths marched with the body in a short procession and disappeared within minutes. A few hundred people arrived with each further casualty or body. They started to make Molotov cocktails in the hospital. I saw a little boy take a bottle from the floor, pull out from his pocket a plastic flask of turpentine and a rag, fill and seal the bottle, light a match, and throw it. Flames started to rise from the tires which had rolled into the courtyard. The leader told me that, in addition to the stone and the Molotov, they had returned to an ancient method: the sling and stone, like David.

The soldiers, who in one of their assaults had come very close to the hospital, were trapped between the burning tires, and hundreds of demonstrators started to surround them. The soldiers tried to flee, but the demonstrators managed to capture one of them. All of his comrades ran.

The captive was stripped of his clothes. His jacket, his pack, and all of his equipment were taken. Nobody touched his body, and he was released wearing only a pair of torn trousers. If they had wanted, they could have killed him. They opened the pack, searched it, and asked where the grenades were. Some of them started to dance, with the rifle magazine in one hand and a “V” sign on the other. They threw the soldier’s jacket and shirt on the ground, and pressed around to trample on them. I asked them, “What are you so happy about?” and they replied, “It is the greatest humiliation for the occupation.”

After this victory, the leader found a few minutes for me. “Once it was difficult to hold even a strike,” he said. “Today, they strike easily. The army opens the shops, and they close them. Rashad al-Shawwa, who no longer has any influence, says that what is happening in the Strip is an expression of people’s despair. But those in despair do not struggle. They surrender.

We don’t actually have firearms, but even so, if the situation continues we won’t only push the soldiers back to Eretz Junction [the major road junction outside the Gaza Strip], but to Tel Aviv.”

My injury started to bother me. A few doctors ran after me, offering me ice compresses. One offered me antibiotic capsules. By the way, after midnight, when the hell was already behind me, I was forced to wait for four hours for treatment in Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv.

A further casualty, who had been shot in the head, was brought to the hospital gate. He died a short time later. His body was snatched. The soldiers again entered the hospital courtyard. Bursts of fire were heard in the building. The echo added to the noise and confusion. People started to barricade themselves inside. There were already a few casualties, but there had been no time to treat them. The leader shouted to the women to go out and treat the wounded, despite the danger.

For each casualty, twenty people rushed to give blood. Twenty-eight casualties arrived within a short time, three of them with serious injuries.

One of them died at 7 pm. In the operating theatre, tens of doctors were working without a break, like a conveyor belt. At about 1 pm, a ten-year-old boy was shot in the hospital courtyard, in the sight of his mother. His body was wrapped in a green hospital

sheet and placed on a wooden board, adorned with two palm fronds.

I went up to the roof. At 3:15, the aerial attack started; a helicopter circled 18 times and dropped tear gas grenades. Everyone started to cough.

Those who didn't get gas from above got it from below. Shots were heard from the direction of the helicopter. I heard the army loudspeaker announce that the hospital had been declared a closed military area. The area was attacked from three sides. The iron gates were broken down at once, and 45 minutes of shooting started. Forty Gazans were arrested. Many were injured. I saw a man running, dragging his foot.

I felt like a live target. It's good that my tape is on, I thought. At least it will be able to record how I was killed. Meanwhile, about thirty jeeps entered the hospital area, and shots were heard from all directions. Some of the injured jumped over the hospital fence into the neighbouring orchard. Others fled into the alleys between the nearby houses, into which it is hard for the army to penetrate. I heard the shouts of the mukhtars, who are being beaten with sticks.

I went into one of the nearby houses and dialled the Ministry of Defence, the prime minister's office. Engaged. No line. I dialled the Knesset. They told me that there was not a single Knesset member on the premises. "They are somewhere in the area, but it is impossible to get hold of them." The operator managed to get hold of Tawfiq Ziyad. "I will raise this in the Knesset," he told me. I also contacted the Red Cross. They said they would come. They didn't come. I checked my pulse. One-hundred and twenty beats per minute.

A demonstration of thousands of people from *Shati'* refugee camp reached the hospital. They had heard of the deaths. In the street, I met the doctor who had seen me when I was injured in the morning. He suggested that I rest at his house, with the help of some pills for the pain. Another doctor was sitting in his house. They both checked me. They said that perhaps I had a broken chin. At 4 pm, the curfew started. Night began to fall. The army cut off the electric supply, and the residents sat in dark homes and lit candles. In the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem, Ariel Sharon lit the first candle of Hanukkah in his new home.

I went onto the roof of the doctor's house. All around, there were gatherings of people and burning tires. The soldiers had disappeared. The darkness,

say the Gazans, is the best weapon against the occupation forces. There were thousands of people in the streets. That was what the curfew looked like. I contacted the paper, seeking a way out. Two Gazans checked the terrain and told me that the main road was blocked. The doctor suggested that I slept at his place. At 9 pm, the electricity returned. "Now the stone rules the streets," they warned me. "Whoever goes out is in danger." I decided to go out.

I walked about a kilometre through the empty streets to the police station. The gate was locked. The police pulled out their guns and pointed them at me and only after they had checked my documents permitted me to enter. When the car from the military government came to take me to Eretz Junction, a few police went up to the roof of the police station in order to protect me for the ten meters I had to walk in the street to the car.

At Eretz Junction, less than ten kilometres from the centre of the events, a few drowsy reservists sat. They asked me what was going on in Gaza and how I had been injured. I told them that I had been asked to act as a referee in a basketball match between Maccabi Hebron and Hapoel Gaza. The crowd attacked me, I explained to them, and said that the referee was a son of a whore. One of the reservists

told me that he was a basketball player himself. He asked me about the level of the Arab players and who won the match.