

An eyewitness account of Israeli occupation

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When the Bulbul Stopped Singing by *Raja Shehadeh, Profile Books Ltd, London, 2003*

When the Bulbul Stopped Singing is the diary of Ramallah resident Raja Shehadeh during the Israeli military occupation of the city in 2002 following the eruption of the second Palestinian Intifada. Based on the events between March 28-April 28, 2002, it recounts the personal and social impact of life under a brutal military siege.

Shehadeh is a well-known Palestinian human rights lawyer who has published two diaries previously, *The Third Way* (1980) and *The Sealed Room* (1991), and the memoir *Strangers in the House: Coming of Age in Occupied Palestine*. Shehadeh says he has written this work in an attempt to familiarise and solidarise the world with the plight of the Palestinian people beyond the filtered news images of the mainstream media:

“I have not decided to publish these diaries merely to paint a bleak picture or to gain the reader’s sympathy for the victimisation the Palestinians experienced. Those well-wishers who called me as the shelling was going on to commiserate, I tried to silence. No one is helped by being reduced to the status of victim. Palestinians don’t need to be pitied or viewed as unfortunates who deserve assistance and relief. They need people to understand their cause and work with them to bring justice and peace to their war-battered land.”

The diary contains many vivid accounts of the war crimes committed by Israel: a journalist shot by an Israeli sniper for reporting the Israeli army’s atrocities; Palestinian homes bulldozed with their inhabitants still inside; family homes invaded by rampaging Israeli soldiers.

Shehadeh states that the true purpose of the Israeli army’s incursions into Palestinian areas was not to capture or kill “terrorists”, but to destroy the material culture and economy of the Palestinian people, to make life unbearable:

“There was a consistent pattern to the vandalism that I saw: data destroyed, whether it was an optician’s, dental medical clinic or the Ministry of Education . . . In those ministries like the Ministry of Culture where the army had spent a number of days, the destruction was total. Nothing had been left unbroken. In other ministries, such as Public Works, the office was dynamited.”

The reader is able to gain a sense of what it must be like to live under foreign occupation with its murderous and dehumanising consequences. Shehadeh conveys this in a way

that does not overwhelm his audience with the traumatising, degrading and deadly conditions described thanks to the poignant moments of human endurance and even black humour described in the diary. For example, even in the midst of the Israeli onslaught he makes plans for the future of his courtyard garden and tries to tend to its needs—simple attempts to take control of one aspect of his life and create beauty despite the brutality of life in a city under siege.

Shehadeh’s account attempts to offer more than a litany of tragic events. In a limited way the diary seeks to explore why things have come to such a point. He examines and finds badly wanting the actions and strategies of the Palestinian leaderships.

Initially a supporter of Israeli-Palestinian talks that took place in Madrid and Washington in the early 1990s, he worked on the Palestinian negotiating team as a legal adviser. He left after a year, recognising that the talks stood no chance of establishing a meaningful peace.

Upon reading the Oslo Accords, in which the illegal Israeli settlements in Gaza and the West Bank remained in place, he became despondent and for a while gave up his human rights work. The Palestinian negotiators had abandoned many of the issues on which he had worked for years in their attempt to strike a deal with the Zionist state.

He describes the effect that the so-called peace process had on the Palestinian masses:

“The only dignified option left, it appeared to many Palestinians, was to resist the occupation in every possible way. The impoverishment of the working people, the absence of hope, exacerbated by the continuation of the building of settlements, and the failure of the Accords to deal with the basic issues led to an explosion. On 28 September 2000 a second, more violent Intifada broke out.”

Shehadeh makes plain that in the course of the proceeding conflict the perspectives of both the secular and Islamic Palestinian leaderships failed the masses. He could discern no clear strategy on the part of the Islamic militant leaders, with suicide bombings providing the Israeli occupying forces with a *casus belli* to launch attacks into Palestinian areas. Shehadeh also recognised that while the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) armed forces, permitted under the Oslo Agreement, were strong enough to do Israel’s work for it by policing the Palestinian areas, the PA stood no chance against the Israeli army in the

inevitable event of a new bout of Israeli aggression.

As part of the diary entry for April 6 put it the Israeli government “had subcontracted to the Palestinians security control over the cities”, while knowing that it could “unilaterally withdraw this contract” and restart the full occupation at a later date.

He describes his anger at the PA for allowing Palestinian civilians, officials, police and militia to be killed while it continued to pursue failed methods: “We continued to suffer one setback after another, one disaster after another. And we are expected to endure in silence, and at the end of every defeat express our understanding and suspend reality by turning the defeat into victory. How many more such victories can we endure?”

Shehadeh points out that the leaders never mobilise the huge international support and sympathy for the Palestinians. The diary also states that no effort is made to appeal to the anti-government sentiments in Israel itself, despite the fact that the expansionist colonialist policy of the government causes suffering to Israelis as well as Palestinians.

But while Shehadeh is highly critical of what he calls the irresponsibility of the Palestinian leaders, he offers no political alternative to their fundamental strategy only a critique of some of its results.

He too expresses his support for a two-states “solution”: “We could have learned to coexist in two separate states side by side. Instead we still view our existence in this land as mutually exclusive of the other.” This position, of setting up a separate Palestinian mini-state alongside Israel was the essential basis of the Oslo Accord that Shehadeh is so critical of.

Any Palestinian state agreed to by the Israelis and the United States would have essentially the same character as that offered under Oslo—impoverished, unviable and economically dependent on Israel and the major imperialist powers. Surrounded and dominated by Israel and ruled over by a self-enriching Palestinian bourgeoisie, it offers no basis for overcoming the social catastrophe and political crisis facing the working class in the occupied territories.

Shehadeh also places great stress on criticising a subjective failure on the part of the PA ministers to secure the best possible deal from the United States, rather than opposing such reliance on a negotiated compromise with the imperialist powers. He is, for example, critical of the PA ministers for not being sufficiently prepared to negotiate with US Secretary of State Colin Powell during his visit to Israel in April 2002 and merely complains of the sanctimonious talk of US diplomats and the slowness of American action.

Powell himself is compared to a rescue worker, providing help for the Palestinians!

This deliberately ignores a political reality that Shehadeh must be well aware of—that Powell and the Bush administration, not to mention all the post-war US governments—bear responsibility for the horrors inflicted on the people of

Palestine. Indeed, the Israeli state and its occupying army are totally reliant on US funds and arms. But in the end all Shehadeh offers is a fond hope that an unspecified but better negotiating strategy will extract more favourable terms from Washington and Tel Aviv.

The diary was recently adapted for the stage and premiered at the Traverse Theatre during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August. David Greig, the book’s adaptor, has not altered any of the original text—only editing it into monologues for the solo protagonist representing Shehadeh, focusing on the most poignant tragedies and the best examples of black humour and defiance. Greig also keeps many aspects of Shehadeh’s analysis of the Palestinian leadership and the ambivalent attitudes of ordinary Israelis and Palestinians towards each other but his adaptation ignores what the diary has to say about US imperialism’s role in the conflict.

Greig, who has written a number of plays for theatre and radio, stated in the programme notes that he wanted to present Shehadeh’s story because it “cut through the forest of newsprint” about the conflict in Palestine. He felt that the diary offered a richer, more complex view than that of “the stone throwing rioter, the bereaved mother, the angry crowd, the martyr, the terrorist”—the usual media images of the Palestinians.

Indeed it does. One of the moments that the production especially emphasises is when Shehadeh’s character hears on a news report about a suicide bombing in Israel. We travel with the character through his initial belief that this was just revenge against every abuse and injustice endured, that the Israeli victims of the blast are the soldiers, the politicians and the police that make much of Palestinian life so hellish. But this quickly subsides into Shehadeh’s sympathy for the real Israeli victims. He recognises that they are sufferers in the conflict too.

In the face of a general media bias towards Israeli actions in the occupied territories, the sensitive and complex presentation of the humanity of the Palestinian people presented in the diary and in the play is to be very much welcomed. It is a sincere and powerful effort to make the audience feel a bond with an oppressed people.

As Shehadeh himself states sympathy is not enough. But the problem is that Shehadeh’s political limitations cannot produce any other response. To go beyond feelings of solidarity towards the Palestinian masses requires a perspective based on the political unification of the international working class, of a common struggle by Arab and Jewish workers throughout the Middle East against the American, Zionist, and Arab ruling classes.



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