

The world on notice

Ahdaf Soueif

In 2007, Ahdaf Soueif founded Engaged Events, which organises the Palestine Festival of Literature in the cities of occupied Palestine and Gaza. Her bestselling novel, The Map of Love, has been translated into 30 languages. She writes for The Guardian and the Egyptian daily Al-Shorouk. This article is a transcription of her comments to the press following the Extraordinary Session on Gaza of the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, held in Brussels in September 2014.

To be completely blunt, we at the Russell Tribunal are putting the world on notice, that in Gaza we are heading towards crimes of great magnitude. I'm not a lawyer, and I will not quibble about words; I will not quibble about whether we're talking genocide or whether we're talking extermination. We're talking about the likely murder of large numbers of unarmed and captive civilians. Looking at the narrative that has led us to here, and looking at components of the spectacle that we are witnessing, I think that this is an inescapable conclusion. We all know – you all know – that the last aggression on Gaza did not come out of the blue: this is the latest in a series of aggressions that have happened across the last few years, since the siege on Gaza was put in place, if not before.

If we look at the characteristics of this attack: we have an unprecedented level of aggression, we have a captive population that is not allowed to escape, and that does not have safe refuge within the Gaza enclave. We look at the length of the attack and how it was sustained, even in the face of widespread international condemnation. We look at the amount of munitions that were used, and we look at the proportion and the number of civilians, the number of children, the number of families that were wiped out. These are all characteristics that one would have thought would be impossible to get away with, yet Israel is getting away with this attack.

We look at the destruction of healthcare, of infrastructure, of community facilities, of industries, of farmland; we look at a destruction that is meant to last, such as the

desertification of land and the diversion of water; we look at long-term consequences. These are all crimes of magnitude. I still find it unbelievable that Israel has actually gotten away with this so far.

The Russell Tribunal would like also to draw attention to evidence that we've heard – it is anecdotal, but it is very telling in the mindsets, the attitudes that it describes – for example, the jokiness with which killing is undertaken. Somebody is asked to step forward, take out his lighter, hold it up, and when he does this he is shot. The game-playing, the imaginary red line that the soldiers draw that nobody else knows about, and when somebody crosses it they get killed. The appearance of randomness; things like: 'Who speaks Hebrew?' – someone steps forward – and gets shot. I think that what all this anecdotal evidence points to is a contempt for the recipients of the violence, and it also – and that is part of the contempt – belittles the experience. It belittles the action. It is as if these actions are not taking place in a serious world, in a world where one is accountable. And that, I believe, is incredibly dangerous. It belittles the people, and it belittles the significance of what is happening to them, it takes the crimes that are being committed against them lightly, and it encourages the world to take them lightly. When we see this in the wider context of the racist attitudes and the racist language that is becoming common in Israel – you saw yesterday the slides that were shown. I will quote only a couple of them, just because they are so incredibly shocking. Here's Naftali Bennett himself:

'I've killed many Arabs in my life, and there's no problem with that.'

There were various others:

'Let us turn this army into an army of avengers';

'Hitler was right but he got the wrong people.'

This is the discourse that is surrounding and that is creating the environment for the actions of the Israeli army in Gaza. So, as I said, we are putting the world on notice that we, with very heavy hearts, believe that something of great magnitude will happen, and we believe that we are in time – the world is in time – to stop it, if the world will take action.

As Michael Mansfield said, we have a list of actions and a list of demands for the international community, for the European Union, for the United Nations, all listed at the end of the summary of findings.

I would like, finally, to make two points. One is that there is no need to speak about the resilience, the *sumoud*, the grace, the courage, the humanity of the Palestinians. We would not all be here were that not

something that we know about and that we honour.

We would also like to commend and to honour the small number of Jewish Israelis who are standing against what is happening in their country and in their society. We heard from very brave people yesterday, we hear from brave people all the time really, whether they have had to leave and are living outside, in the international community, or whether they are remaining at great, great cost to themselves and to their families and to their lives within the state of Israel: we honour them and we commend them and we stretch out a hand of friendship and solidarity to them.



Photo: Virginie N' Guyen

Jurors Adhaf Soueif, Richard Falk (on her right), Ken Loach and Vandana Shiva