

Editorial

Even unto Gaza

The Russell Tribunal on Palestine met in extraordinary session in Brussels on 25 September 2014, a month after an extended ceasefire was called following Israel's latest, bloodiest, and most protracted onslaught on the people of the Gaza Strip. During 51 days, more than 2,200 people were killed, of whom the overwhelming majority were civilians, including hundreds of children. Tens of thousands of homes were reduced to rubble, while hospitals, schools, infrastructure, businesses and farms were all targeted by the Israeli military.

The jury heard compelling eyewitness and expert testimony. We feature the written submissions of an Israeli and a Palestinian, Eran Efrati and Mohammed Omer, who also gave testimony in person and answered questions from members of the jury. Mr Efrati, a former soldier, recounted the destruction of Shuja'iyya, in the East of Gaza City, the scale of which shocked seasoned military analysts, while Mr Omer, a journalist, focused on Khuza'a in the southern Gaza Strip, which suffered massive damage under Israeli fire.

Two other eyewitnesses, Ashraf Mashharawi and Raji Sourani, despite sustained attempts to do so, were prevented from travelling from Gaza to Brussels to testify in person to the Tribunal. Such prohibitions on Palestinian witnesses have been a recurrent feature of sessions of the Russell Tribunal on Palestine.

Juror Ahdaf Soueif puts the world on notice, notwithstanding the mass killings that have already taken place there, that in Gaza 'we are heading towards crimes of great magnitude'. This latest aggression is one of a series during the last few years, since the siege of Gaza was imposed. As she says, there is time to stop killings and destruction of even greater magnitude being perpetrated in the future. But the world is on notice that it has to act to prevent this happening. Eran Efrati informed the Tribunal that, whilst it was sitting, the Israeli government had agreed a substantial increase in its military budget of some 14 billion shekels (£2.3 billion). They are preparing for the next time.

The Tribunal's preliminary findings propose a range of actions at different levels, including that all European Union member states recognise the state of Palestine. The new government in Sweden has moved swiftly to do so. Now, the UK Parliament has also voted by a large majority to recognise the state of Palestine. When will the British Government do so?

Certainly, Israel is losing influential support. Sir Richard Ottaway, Chairman of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee and formerly MP for Nottingham North, is and remains a lifelong friend of Israel. However, he told the House of Commons that the recent annexation of 950 acres of the West Bank 'outraged him more than anything else in my political life, mainly because it makes me look a fool, and that is something that I resent'. He concluded:

'I have to say to the Government of Israel that if they are losing people like me, they will be losing a lot of people.'

Such actions, by themselves, will not prevent the sequel to 'Operation Mighty Cliff', as it was called in Hebrew. (The moniker 'Protective Edge' was spin.) But they are indicative of a change of mood more generally about Israel's recurrent brutal, deadly and illegal behaviour. Calls to account are increasing, including from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. As Richard Falk writes in this issue of *The Spokesman*, the Tribunal's assessment of Israel's behaviour towards the people of Gaza 'will support the long struggle to make the rule of law applicable to the strong as well as the weak'.

*And Joshua smote them from Kadeshbarnea even unto Gaza,
and all the country of Goshen, even unto Gibeon.
Book of Joshua, chapter 10, verse 41, King James Version*

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Russell's book *Freedom and Organisation* was a discursive attempt to 'trace the main causes of political change during the hundred years from 1814 to 1914'. Published in 1934, it warned that the 'same causes that produced war in 1914 are still operative,' adding that 'unless checked by international control of investment and of raw material, they will inevitably produce the same effect, but on a larger scale.' Such critical reflection has largely been absent from much public commentary on the First World War centenary. However, John Gittings has immersed himself in the historians' discourse, which, as he told the Peace History Conference, 'Alternative Voices of World War One', at London's Imperial War Museum, is rather more informative than what political leaders have dared to say. One prominent alternative voice was that of Russell himself, who speaks to us from the heady days of 1917, when Russia was between revolutions.