

## **Open Letter in Support of Gaza Freedom March**

Out of the delegation to Gaza that CODEPINK led in May came the idea to organize a large march through Gaza, with a significant international presence including well-known personalities. In the spirit of non-violent direct action, the march would challenge the appalling and inhumane siege of Gaza. The idea, which immediately captured the imagination of many organizers, was the brainchild of Norman Finkelstein. We are truly grateful for Prof. Finkelstein's creative thinking and willingness to put forward big ideas that generate enthusiasm and engagement.

However, after the initial call, the framework of the march was challenged by highly-respected Palestinian activists, Omar Barghouti from Jerusalem, and Haidar Eid from the Gaza. Their criticism, expressed with the utmost respect for the courage and good will of the organizers, challenged the organizers' decision to delay engaging in a wide conversation with Palestinian civil society and activists until after the call was made and the framework formulated. As Barghouti and Eid noted, that also led to a number of problems with the framework and the call. The call failed to provide historical context to the current siege, barely referred to the occupation, and picked and chose from the history of Palestinian non-violent resistance. It also used language that inadvertently reflected Israeli propaganda strategies, isolating Palestinians in Gaza from their counterparts in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Israel, and the Diaspora.

Ultimately, these criticisms led to a compromise that satisfied both the Palestinian critics and most of the initial organizers. This compromise was reflected in a "context document" that is now part of the call. We welcome the concerns of prominent Palestinian activists who represent significant grassroots organizing. We see in the exchange, negotiation and outcome a model example of how work of solidarity can deepen and improve through giving full attention to honest and constructive criticism from those most impacted by the horrors we are challenging.

We have read the "context document" and express our full support for the march based on the revised call.

Changing course is never easy. It would have been far better had this discussion taken place before the call went out. That, however, is a lesson for the future. The compromise led a few of the organizers to leave in anger and recriminations. Some argued that the new context document is "sectarian" and will severely damage the potential of the march. While disputes are inevitable in every political endeavor, we call on all parties to cast aside differences and arguments, to respect the compromise and unite on our common objective, ending the siege of Gaza. What is important now is getting the best and most effective march possible.

We see the "context document" as a thoughtful attempt to bring together for this march those of us who support BDS and the full objectives of Palestinian liberation, including the right of return and full and equal rights for Palestinians living in Israel, with those activists whose support for lifting the siege of Gaza is largely humanitarian. Contrary to misrepresentations, the "context document" does not require marchers to adhere to BDS. But as the march puts non-violence on its banner and claims inspiration from non-violent Palestinian resistance, it cannot, without being offensive, ignore the increasing presence and far reaching international impact of BDS as a Palestinian campaign of non-violent resistance that is endorsed by all factions,

including Fatah and Hamas, as well as over 100 civil society associations. The growing support for BDS among prominent Western figures and mainstream organization belies the claim that the mere mention of it is divisive.

Nor does the document commit the marchers to support the Palestinian right of return. It does commit the marchers to recognize the Palestinian *Nakba* and the historical fact that the refugees' right of return, recognized by U.N. Resolution 194, has been denied. These refugees make up 75% of the population of Gaza and are the recipients of this march's solidarity. To recognize this history does not compel one to agree to any specific resolution of the conflict. But refusing to recognize it denies the history of the Palestinian people, a denial that is inconsistent with any form of solidarity.

The new document's only demand is the end of the siege of Gaza. There are no other demands. Nothing in it prevents activists committed to a "two state solution" and a "Jewish state" from participating. We therefore strongly object to representing the new language as an attempt to limit the scope of the march. We take strong offense at the attempt to label the recognition of the concerns of Palestinian liberation within the context of a solidarity action as "sectarian." We seriously doubt that the number of people willing to fly to Egypt and then march in Gaza, yet who refuse to recognize the history of Gaza, is very large.

We are also heartened by the addition of non-governmental partners in Gaza. As soon as the context statement was added, endorsements came from the University Teachers' Association in Palestine, Palestinian Student's Campaign, Al-Aqsa University, Arab Cultural Forum-Gaza, Al-Quds Bank for Culture and Information-Gaza. We are also encouraged by the addition of the International Solidarity Movement and support from members of the South African Palestine Solidarity community. The elected government of Gaza has also endorsed the march and will now hopefully increase its assistance.

In supporting this compromise, we are mindful of the original aim of the organizers for large and "ecumenical" participation. We share that goal. However, our conversation would benefit from honesty about the meaning of "ecumenical." It never means "everybody". Had the march's organizers joined Israel in blaming Hamas for the continuation of the siege, we could have pitched participation to the Simon Wiesenthal Center mailing list. We could have recruited celebrities such as Alan Dershowitz and Daniel Pipes. We don't just want the maximum number of marchers; we want the maximum number that can be achieved without compromising the visions of the diverse organizers and solidarity groups participating in this particular project.

Where should the line be drawn? This is a difficult decision that haunts every political struggle and always requires deliberation, negotiation, and compromise. It is misleading to frame the debate as one between those who want maximum participation and those motivated by ideology, in particular when this framing aims to delegitimize the concerns of Palestinian activists representing significant sections of Palestinian grassroots organizing. We all have political lines that we won't cross. The lines drawn by those at the very heart of the struggle deserve our particular respect.

We now have a fair and inclusive basis for organizing the march, open to proponents of radically different political visions yet respectful of all, and in particular respectful of Palestinian

history and struggle. Let us all do our best to make this march as big and as successful as possible.

Please endorse the march at

<http://www.gazafreedommarch.org/article.php?list=type&type=416>. If you or your organization would also like to endorse this letter of support, email us at [ijan@ijsn.net](mailto:ijan@ijsn.net).

*Signatories:*

International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network

Middle East Children's Alliance

Salim Vally, Palestine Solidarity Committee, Johannesburg, South Africa

Savera Kalideen, Palestine Solidarity Committee, Johannesburg, South Africa

Sofiah MacLeod, Secretary, Scottish Palestine Solidarity Committee

Mick Napier, Chair, Scottish Palestine Solidarity Committee