

Mahmoud Sarsak, Ending Normalisation and the return of pre-Oslo Resistance by Adie Mormech, October 25, 2012

Mahmoud Sarsak's refusal to attend the Barcelona Vs Real Madrid Classico match is a historic act of non-normalisation against Israel. For the hero of the Palestinian national team who fought his way free from an Israeli prison throughout a 96 day hunger strike ordeal, this is an act that sends a message to all others faced with the same question, "to normalise or not to normalise".

The huge debate sparked across Palestine was vigorous and at times went right to the core of the Palestinian resistance strategy against Israeli colonisation and apartheid. On Monday 1st October Mahmoud Sarsak called a press conference, accompanied by BDS activists, at the weekly demonstrations by prisoners' families outside the Red Cross Offices.

"There is a difference between a person arrested with his weapon, in military uniform from inside his tank... and the arrest of an athlete at a crossing who was on his way to a professional sports club in the West Bank". Mahmoud said on his refusal to attend the game. "I announce my readiness to meet Barcelona or any other Spanish club outside of the context of a joint invitation with Gilad Shalit, inviting me as a Palestinian athlete who experienced... the suffering of a hunger strike for freedom and dignity."

The refusal came on the back of a chronology of events that began with a former Israeli corporal Gilad Shalit having a request accepted by a member of the Israeli foreign ministry to be hosted at the club for the 'Clasico' football match between Barcelona FC and Real Madrid. The decision was met with uproar as Spanish solidarity groups and supporters clubs began pressuring the club to reverse the decision. A statement was issued by over 30 Gaza clubs, within which Sarsak had commented that boycotts and non-normalisation were the only course of action, "until they allow Palestinians their basic rights, including the right to participate freely in sport and sports competitions."

Despite the statement, the former Palestinian Authority preventive security chief Jibril Rajoub and now head of the Palestinian Football Federation, made a parallel application for himself, the Palestinian Ambassador to Spain and Mahmoud Sarsak to attend the clasico match in response to Shalit's attendance. Barcelona duly accepted, and the Catalan football club made a statement entitled, "for peace and harmony in the Middle East" which could have been the name for so many collaborations that veil the coloniser-colonised relationship between the two sides.

Intense pressure was mounted from those in the PA affiliated media, such as journalist for Al Kas Qatari sport Mohammed Al Nakhala telling him to, "please go". Sarsak courageously refused the invitation, upsetting those of the Palestinian Authority whose normalising exploits had become so "normal" as to rarely be challenged. The Palestinian Authority has proved after 19 years to have been nothing more than a Palestinian guard for Israel's brutal occupation instead of confronting the aggressor or taking any forward steps towards justice in the region.

Critics also overlooked the fact that Mahmoud could later make the case without being tarnished by adhering to the typical Western political and media line that the conflict is about "two sides" needing to walk forward "together" towards "peace and reconciliation," the strategy that has failed so demonstrably.

The Spanish group BDS Catalunya, together with 34 solidarity groups in Spain, had already organised another invitation for Sarsak to come to Spain, attend a Barcelona match and meet those footballers who had supported him during his prison ordeal. This platform would prioritise the voice of an innocent under military siege and occupation, as opposed to diluting it through an appearance alongside the former Israeli corporal Gilad Shalit in what Western media would at best have presented as some kind of 'Middle East conflict football personality contest.'

Sarsak's stance was a sobering reminder of the unshakeable steadfastness that the Palestinian struggle for liberation from Israel's continuing colonisation had for so long embodied. It's no surprise that it took one of the many who put their lives on the line with hunger strikes in Israeli jails to re-invigorate this spirit of resistance that on principle is not prepared to tolerate a status quo scenario with those entrenched in a process of denying a people freedom.

Blogger Shahd Abusalama, who with other Gaza youth produced a video in support of

Sarsak's decision said, "It was clear that Israel was going to use this platform to beautify their image in front of the watching global audience who are ignorant about the practices of occupation soldiers such as Shalit. We are proud of Mahmoud Sarsak for refusing to legitimise this attempt by Barcelona FC to equate Israeli occupation forces with Palestinians living under Israeli Apartheid."

Importantly, the decision was itself a media story, but this time one that put a spotlight on the failed collaborative initiatives that have emerged since the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993. It has been one of the highest profile rejections to date of the relentless investment since then, mainly by Western countries, to hoodwink and redirect the energies of those fighting the Palestinian cause through joint hostings, meetings, initiatives, discussion groups all across Palestine and the world, while Israeli illegal settlements, land expropriations and violent attacks multiplied.

Oslo helped create a culture whereby normalisation became more and more acceptable, and it spread across the Arab world. It was in stark contrast to the first intifada from 1987-1993 at the heart of which were blanket strikes, widespread boycotts of Israeli goods, refusals to pay taxes, alternative economies led by women based on cottage industries and massive popular resistance.

The Palestinian global call to boycott, divest and sanction (BDS) from Israel in 2005, endorsed by over 170 Palestinian parties and organisations, was the first clear break from the abject failure of the previous attempts to reconcile with the expanding Israeli military occupation. It was a call to renew the spirit of the first intifada, accompanied by mobilizations around the world to boycott until the Israeli regime reverses its policies of Apartheid, Occupation and Ethnic Cleansing.

The Boycott National Committee spelled out the red lines of normalisation, and across the globe a stream of BDS movements and actions followed, gradually serving to isolate Israel academically, culturally, commercially and in sports. The BDS movement has grown faster than the inspirational boycott campaigns in the 70s and 80s against South African Apartheid, a similarly Western sponsored regime with systematic racism and exclusion of the indigenous population at its core. Not only does the definition of the crime of apartheid correspond to Israeli policy, but a recent poll suggests that the majority of Israelis desire such a system.

It has also served to unite international resistance around principles of equality, justice and freedom, while providing a hugely effective educational tool, penetrating mainstream consciousness through simple acts of non-compliance.

It should come as no surprise that it is a Palestinian prisoner whose dignified act has been the catalyst for refocusing the Palestinian strategy for liberation. The Oslo narrative of believing that justice can come for the occupied by participating in events, negotiations and joint projects with the occupier has proven to be not just futile, but a contributory factor in Israel's continuing project of ethnic cleansing and apartheid. The Israeli decision to outlaw boycotts and anti-normalisation and their own analysis that the BDS movement poses an existential threat should underline this.

"The invitation to Gilad Shalit suggests an equivalence between the Zionist executioner and the Palestinian victim, and means I cannot attend," read Sarsak's statement.

The Oslo narrative is behind us.

The Israeli regime should be isolated and held to account until justice, freedom and equality go beyond the cliché, through a renewal of the pre-Oslo spirit of the first Palestinian intifada, rising opposition in the Arab world and intensified global boycotts divestment and sanctions.