

The Most Invisible & Silent Embassy

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By Stuart Littlewood - London

(source: Palestine Chronicle)

As if they didn't have enough problems, tormented Palestinians suffer the added misfortune of being represented here in London - the media capital of the western world - by the most invisible and silent embassy it is possible to imagine.

A year ago, campaigners urged the ambassador to get his act together or go home. He angrily retorted that he had "a plan of how to influence British Media to give us the Palestinians more exposure".

Whatever the plan was, it hasn't worked. Press releases and briefings are non-existent. It is many months since I last heard the ambassador on radio or TV, while his Israeli opposite number pops up on the national airwaves with nauseating regularity. And the Palestinians' precious shop window - their embassy website – never functioned properly and has now been taken down. What a way, as the Americans say, to run a f***ing railroad. So what's going on?

Littlewood to Ambassador, 27 August

With so much happening both in Palestine and on the propaganda front, could you please bring me up to date on the Delegation's diplomatic and PR activities? We see no news releases, no attempt to set the news agenda and the website appears to have died despite earlier assurances that it would be given new life. This is most dispiriting for Palestine's friends and campaigners here in the UK, especially when the Israeli side are at full throttle with their distorted messages and briefings.....

Ambassador to Littlewood, 27 August

Thank you for your concern and interest in the Palestinian cause. For the last 5 weeks, I was away in the US giving series of lectures about the situation in Palestine and teaching at the University of Maryland at College Park, Washington DC.

I was back on August 24, and since then I have been giving interviews about Netanyahu's notorious policies vis-a-vis the Palestinians and above all on his settlements policies. We have participated in the demonstration at 10 Downing Street against Netanyahu's visit to London. We will be present at all rallies and functions of the PSC and other organizations planned for the near future.

I agree the Website needs upgrading, I already contacted Website expert to work on it, and our information counselor had been on vacation for the last month, hopefully by next week, we should resume our work at full speed.

We are short of staff and help, we need volunteers especially for the media...

A whole year to contact a website expert? A teaching tour in Maryland? (Why aren't those US lecture notes transcribed into public information documents or press briefings and circulated?) The "information counselor" is on a month's vacation? (Are things any different when he/she is not on holiday?). Sounds like the PA/PLO is running a nice little rest home.

Littlewood to Ambassador, 28 August

The Americans certainly need educating, but so too do the British and other Europeans. I see that access to the Embassy's website is "forbidden" to those who don't have the "privilege". That should ensure they never bother to visit it again…

It is vital that the Embassy is seen as a reliable source of newsworthy material with readily available spokespeople with clear and faultless English. Once this is established it will be easier to engage the interest of mainstream media. As things stand, the Palestinians continue to lose the all-important war of words even though truth and justice are on their side, and as a result the cause is trampled in the dust.

Next day I saw a piece in Haaretz by Barak Ravid, 'PM slams Breaking the Silence', reporting how Netanyahu had lashed out against Breaking the Silence, an Israeli organization that collects testimonies from Israeli soldiers about alleged abuse of Palestinians in the territories. The Israeli prime minister criticised the British government for helping to fund its work. 'Netanyahu also addressed the lawsuits filed in Britain against Israeli officers and senior officials for alleged war crimes, over their actions in the territories. Netanyahu said Israel was acting in self-

defense, and Israeli officers should not be accused of crimes, just as British officers should not be subject to lawsuits for their actions in Afghanistan or Iraq.

"When Netanyahu asked Brown to promote legislation to prevent such suits, Brown said he would see what could be done. Netanyahu also asked Brown to have his cabinet publicly denounce attempts to impose an academic and economic boycott on Israel."

This is a re-hash of Livni's (?) ridiculous demands that Israel's worst gangsters be allowed to walk free in this country. The idea that prime minister Gordon Brown might consider changing the law to accommodate Netanyahu is scandalous and needs exposing. This is the kind of story that ought to be featured and expanded on the embassy's website.

Haaretz also carried Mohammed Omer's report 'It's Tents for Most Homeless Families in Gaza, Prefabricated Huts for the Lucky Few'. The parade of international diplomats and aid workers coming to survey the destruction in Gaza had changed nothing, said Omer. He reminded us that Israel's 22-day attack on Gaza killed more than 1,400 Palestinians and injured thousands more, mostly civilians. 3,500 houses were completely destroyed and 2,100 seriously damaged.

In the weeks following the Israeli assault, aid groups set up tent camps in the hardest hit areas, but the prefabricated shelters did not arrive until June, when the Hamas-led government in Gaza began distributing 192 structures supplied by Turkey. "The 40-foot-square pre-fabricated huts in which fewer than 200 families currently are living have no toilet, washroom, kitchen or private facilities. Indeed, they are little more than a simple tool shed. Yet, in Gaza, five months after Israel halted its attack, it passes for a home."

Despite more than \$4.5 billion pledged at the international donors' conference to help rebuild the Gaza Strip, nothing seems to be getting through... except a few tool sheds. Israel's crippling siege remains in place, courtesy of the international community, and no construction materials are allowed to reach the 1.5 million trapped there.

Littlewood to Ambassador, 29 August

Why do we have to rely on my friend Mohammed Omer for this appalling news when it should be shouted from the rooftops by the PA and fed to all delegations and embassies for broadcasting at full volume?

This last week the embassy is supposed to have "resumed work at full speed". But there's no further reply... no press releases, no briefings, no website, nothing.

The inevitable conclusion is that the regime in Ramallah has gagged its London operation and instructed it not to cross swords with the Israelis. Otherwise Ramallah would have ensured they had all the skills and resources needed to match the enemy and make a creditable impact here at this important hub in the western world.

How impressed, I wonder, are the folks in the Occupied Territories — the dispossessed, the humiliated, the blitzed, the maimed, the homeless, the workless, the starving, the sick and dying, those whose doors are smashed down in the middle of the night by the rifle-butts of military thugs, those thousands abducted and thrown in jail without being charged, those hundreds of thousands forced to scrape a meager living in refugee camps for the last 60 years, the millions who day after day face Israel's vile Occupation with a mounting sense of hopelessness as the moralizing Western Powers twiddle their thumbs... not to mention the rising generation of youngsters whose path to a university education is strewn with obstacles and whose hopes of a life of fulfillment are permanently dashed?

How impressed are they with the way the embassy represents their cause? And whose side are the grey suits in Ramallah on, anyway?

Branded "an enemy of Palestine"... should I laugh or cry? - Sept 10, 2009

Shock-horror, I've just been declared an enemy of Palestine.

A mysterious woman phoned from the embassy. She was furious about the article 'Palestinian embassy in London strangely silent as Israeli terror-strikes and land-grabs continue', which appeared last weekend. I could hear male voices in the background egging her on.

Naturally I'm anxious to behave correctly in this crisis situation. Should I be sobbing my heart out?

Or should I throw a party to celebrate my new status and wear it like a badge of honour? Is there a club I can join?

Being cast into outer darkness by the PLO and Palestinian Authority is a great sadness. They are running out of friends so fast that they really can't afford to make more enemies.

But never mind, Palestine is not the PLO or the PA. There are still the ordinary Palestinian people, whom I greatly admire for their courage and cheerful resilience. And those guys in Gaza… you know, their democratically elected government who are holed up there and still being blitzed and starved every day along with the 1.5 million population. We dare not speak their name because a gang of criminal lunatics in the West has labelled them terrorists. They represent Palestine too.

Anyway, I just had to drop the Ambassador a line to tell him – as if he didn't already know – that this ranting female, known to me only as “Linda X”, rang from the embassy and I suspect she's one of his bird-dogs. She accused me of negative criticism and branded me an enemy of Palestine.

I call my remarks fair comment, of course, and they are always accompanied by positive marketing advice.

The Ambassador's reply sets a new tone in diplomatic language….

I had promised myself not to react to your destructive and negative e-mails, that carry no weight and based on flagrant distortions of the facts about the Palestinian General Delegation. However, I must straighten the records with your extremely biased allegations that are utterly baseless and serves only the interests of our enemy.

He continues in this vein with little regard for facts. To save embarrassment I will not reproduce it all, but here is a snippet.

Firstly, you are not qualified to judge the performance of the Delegation because it is obvious that your little knowledge about our activities is posing a great damage to our ethos and reputation. Secondly, instead of attacking the Ambassador for not appearing enough on radio and television, concert your efforts and skills in extracting interviews for him by putting pressure on your biased Media than accusing the Ambassador and the Delegation….

I still insist to meet you face to face, but it seems you don't have the guts to face the realities….

If the Ambassador and his staff cannot cultivate media contacts and persuade them he's worth reporting, they should find other employment. How absurd to suggest that I or anyone else should try to fix him up with media interviews.

Yes, we all know the British media are biased. But editors say they receive press releases from the embassy "once in a blue moon". When will it sink in that the Palestinians's press and PR team must be at least as professional as the Israelis's?

I'm accused of refusing to meet him despite the fact that I have been to the embassy twice. He turned down a further meeting in Cambridge because he decided it was unnecessary, rudely dumping the campaigners (including myself) who invited him. I have offered to meet him again but on reflection can't think why I should.

He's right about one thing though. Not being on the diplomatic cocktail circuit or embedded with the ambassadorial retinue I'm in no position to judge at close quarters the activities of the Delegation. All I have is the view from the outside like everyone else… and it's depressing. Israel is given a free ride and the Palestinian cause deserves far better representation than it is getting.

If the Ambassador cannot see the need for a disciplined media strategy and a website showcasing the desperate plight of the Palestinians and their right to freedom, and take criticism with good grace, perhaps he should return to the gentle academic life of Bethlehem University.

If it's any consolation, a reader commenting on the article that caused all the fuss has written to say: “How about the Palestinian embassy in Ottawa? It's even worse than the one in London.”

- Stuart Littlewood is author of the book Radio Free Palestine, which tells the plight of the Palestinians under occupation. He contributed this article to PalestineChronicle.com. Visit: www.radiofreepalestine.co.uk.