

# Only sanctions will stop this brutal campaign:

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The Guardian, 13 July 2006

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Last Saturday, I had lunch with friends in London at a benefit for the medical school at the Arab University in Jerusalem. At home later, I watched the news on al-Jazeera: 12 more Palestinians killed by the Israeli army. There were sirens. There were young men bending to kiss the forehead of their fallen comrade while his mother sat rocking and speechless. There was a man hurrying through twisted metal, carrying the bleeding body of a little girl. There were women on balconies, boys holding toddlers, old men in kaffiyes, and they all said: "Where is the world? Where are the Arabs?"

I pressed a button and switched them all off. I went to bed and slept. Well, I sat on the edge of the bed for a bit. And before that I had watched the images replay in my head while I brushed my teeth and my hair. I had reminded myself to breathe properly and not to frown so hard. And after I went to bed I got up a couple of times to drink water - to try to push down whatever was sitting on my chest and making my breathing short and shallow. But, in the end, I slept.

I woke up this morning, and the day was fresh and new. And I had new emails. Some were from friends desperate to do something and debating what it should be. Some from groups and organisations drafting letters and appeals on behalf of the Palestinians and the Iraqis -yes, let's not lose sight of Haditha and Ramadi because it's Gaza's turn on the rack. And there were messages from the four corners of the earth that had started their e-life in Gaza. Here's one:

"Dear Friends Everywhere, I live in al-Twam, between Beit Lahia and Jabalia Camp. The Israeli troops are moving towards the area where I live. They are 2km away. In the last two days, 35 persons were killed and 120 injured. The Israeli troops are shooting and shelling randomly the houses of the civilians ... Now, while writing this email, at 10pm, the tanks are about 500m from my home. In the coming hours, my home will be in the invaded and reoccupied areas. I do not know what might happen later. My children are hearing the shootings and explosions. They understand that they are exposed to a threat from which no one can protect them ... The only thing I thought I could do is to send this appeal - and hope. Safwat Diab."

Mr Diab, your appeal has reached me as it has reached many, many people.

If Ehud Olmert thinks the actions of the Israeli army only affect Mr Diab and his neighbours, or even only Palestinians and Arabs, he is mistaken. The world is paying

attention. Around the world, millions are bearing witness, and they hate being in the position of the bystander; they are taking action.

In October 2004, at the European Social Forum in London, an Israeli air-force pilot, Yonatan Shapira, called for sanctions against Israel. A year earlier, Shapira had refused to bomb Palestinian towns and had influenced 26 of his comrades-in-arms to do the same.

He spoke of his love for his country and of his conviction that it was on the road to self-destruction. He had come to London to ask for help. Europe was Israel's only hope, he said: it must impose sanctions on his country and force it to make a real peace. About 3,000 people were on their feet cheering him. A young Palestinian woman stood up and said that the last Israeli soldier she had seen had made her walk on the bodies of her cousins as she stumbled out of Shatila in 1982. Seeing Shapira and hearing his words reaffirmed her faith in a common humanity. Emotions ran high. It seemed that truth and reconciliation were almost within our grasp.

Yet nothing in the official world of politics reflects the popular will. Israel continues to enjoy favoured-nation status with a Europe that starves the Palestinians for electing Hamas. We, the citizens, busy ourselves raising funds for medical equipment, collecting books and signing appeals while the Israeli army picks off a few kids in Gaza, blows off a few limbs in Jenin, knocks down a few houses in Nablus - and offers funds and freshly stolen West Bank land to Jewish settlers recently evacuated from Gaza.

Three hundred British Jews have signed a letter strongly condemning Israel's actions.

But we are all made complicit by the failure of our governments to act to stop Israel's barbarous campaign against the Palestinians. British Arabs feel doubly compromised as the world registers, yet again, the spineless behaviour of the Arab governments.

Since the capture of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit by Palestinian fighters, Israel has killed 60 Palestinians. The Gaza Strip is virtually inaccessible to foreigners, and there are reports Israel will soon close off the West Bank as well. Yesterday, in what appears to be an attempt to take the heat off Gaza, Hizbullah in south Lebanon attacked Israeli border posts and captured two soldiers. It is only a matter of time before things escalate. At the heart of it all is Israel's persecution of the Palestinians.

It's time to help the Palestinians not just survive within the parameters of Israeli policy, but to save them from Israel's brutal plan; to save Israel from itself; and to save the world from the effects of the terrible sorrow and anger that is the response of millions to the Palestinian anguish. It's time to make Israel face up to what it is and what it wants to become. It's time for sanctions.

*Ahdaf Soueif 's latest book is Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground*