

## **Palestinian Arabs of Israel Demonstrate against Gaza Siege at Erez Checkpoint**

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[*Editor's note:* Lynda Brayer, an Israeli human rights lawyer living in Haifi, was a member of the Center for Theology and Social Analysis in St. Louis, Missouri, during 2007 and 2008. She provides this account for inclusion in our coverage of the Gaza Freedom March at <http://palestine.ctsatl.org>.]

Palestinians Arabs of Israel together with Israeli Jews met at the Erez checkpoint to Gaza at the northern end of the Strip. Busloads of people came from all over the country to protest in solidarity against the continuing siege against the people of Gaza, as well as to remember the brutal attack by Israel one year ago against the Gazan population, civilian and unarmed and living under Israeli occupation since June 1967.

The vast majority of demonstrators were Palestinians Arabs who came from Jaffa, Haifa, the Galilee towns and villages, Jerusalem, Beersheba and the Negev. They were joined by the Jewish Israeli radical left who constitute a fragment of the Israeli Jewish population as well as by international supporters. There were probably up to two thousand people present, a number greater than expected. Thursday is a working day in Israel, the schools operate and people will be taking off for their feasts and the New Year, so it was not an especially propitious date for them all. Secondly supporters from Tel Aviv did not come as there will be a protest march in Tel Aviv on Saturday evening at 18.30 in which the Israeli left will participate.

Those who arrived carried Palestinian flags and called out in unison for lifting the siege and freeing up life in the Strip. The demonstration was held in the wide meidan, or square, facing the Gaza terminal. It looks like the air terminal of Cairo International airport – only it was completely shut down! Probably any goods that needed to go in were forbidden to do so today – which is the ironic result of the demonstration. However, the magnificence of this terminal, creating the effect that one is about to enter paradise, carried with it the same significance of the “Arbeit Macht Frei” pronouncement over the gates of a concentration camps! Only in this instance, one felt that the pronouncement would have read “Starvation makes one free!”

Despite the incipient horror of both the place and the actual situation, one could only admire the Israeli authorities for having learned almost instantly from the Egyptian blundering and unnecessary violence, how not to create an international newsworthy incident. On arrival at the meeting place, the buses were waved over to their parking places by normal Israeli policement with only a couple of barriers determining the flow of the traffic. Many people arriving together in private cars were also waved into place, without any fervor, shouting, nastiness or violence. It was carried out absolutely calmly and in an orderly fashion. People then ambled over to the large meidan set aside for the demonstration where some barriers indicated the boundaries, but once again, there were no police lined up, no plexiglass shields, no tasers and no fierce looking men. On the hillock behind the area, there were snipers who carried live munitions, of course. But there were only about ten of them, and they too gave a relaxed impression. Some photographers were also on the hillock at a distance of about fifty meters from the snipers, and they too looked relaxed. Naturally there were maybe tens or even a hundred secret service police around, which is exactly what one would expect. But there was no rough behaviour.

People remained together for about two hours. Such a demonstration brings together the activists from all over the country, giving them a welcome opportunity to see each other, renew acquaintances, meet and make new friends, and exchange opinions. The permit given for the demonstration must have been for two hours, because the demonstration took place between eleven in the morning until one o'clock lunch time, at which point people began ambling back to their vehicles of transportation. The atmosphere was extremely relaxed, and it was clear that none of the leadership on either side, wished to promote any confrontation, and everyone returned safely home. From the Israeli point of view, one could only admire the way they handled the entire affair, making the American way of dealing with demonstrations, such as the G-20 meeting in Pittsburgh, look as if they had resurrected the Brown Shirts!

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