

A Boy and an Artificial Leg: A Gaza Story

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Global Research, June 11, 2009

11 June 2009

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His room is ready; the walls have fresh paint and my kids prepared a basket of chocolates and other treats to place beside his bed. They hung a poster on his door that has been decorated with colored pens and glitter that says "Welcome Shobhi!" I have taught them that "Sobhi" actually means the "morning light", and that during his visit, he will not be treated as a visitor, but as a brother. They have compiled a list of fun places to visit, parks, the beach and maybe a ferry ride.

Two weeks ago, my family, after months of anticipation, were scheduled to be the host family for a very special and unusual exchange program for kids from Gaza to visit the US . Our host child, Sobhi was schedule to arrive on May 30th.

My family was excited and a little nervous, I noticed my wife taking every opportunity to share the news of the arrival of our special visitor. We call Sobhi's family from time to time, realizing that sending a child off to a foreign land to live with a strange family can be unsettling for a parent. But I think our occasional conversations are putting everyone at ease.

As time has progressed, we have learned more news of Sobhi's life and family in Gaza , and through the weeks, news has changed and altered. We first thought he was 11 years old, and then learned that he is actually fifteen. We originally thought his family lived in the town of Khan Yunis , but then learned that he is from the northern town of Beit Lahia . We thought that he was maimed when his house was demolished in the Israeli attack of January 2009, but then later learned that his leg was actually blown off by an Israeli tank shell when the army opened fire on his family while they were farming their land. So, day by day, we are learning more about this fine young boy's tragic lot.

Like Sobhi, disgracefully growing numbers of children forever maimed, dismembered and killed by Israel are not only somehow disregarded by the world media and therefore the world's conscience - but to add insult to injury - they are even denied access to healthcare.

Sobhi is one of many Gazan children that have been taken under the wing of the Palestinian Children's Relief Fund, a non-profit, US based organization that organizes medical exchange programs, sending injured children abroad for treatment when it is inaccessible in Palestine, as well as sending medical teams to Palestine for short-term medical missions.

While I cannot express my admiration and gratefulness for the tireless work of the staff of PCRf, in anticipation of Sobhi's arrival, the irony fails to escape me, that of this innocent and unassuming son of a Gazan farmer, whose life is forever altered by a tank shell propelled by Israel and subsidized by the US, to venture alone across the world to be the recipient of another US manufactured implement; a plastic leg.

And now, as if things could get any worse, even the possibility of getting Sobhi here seems grim.

Coming from Gaza , Sobhi must cross the Rafah border to begin his journey from Cairo . But Egypt is refusing to grant Sobhi entry. It is the predicament that so many Gazans face following the January massacres: hospitals lay in ruins, medicine scarce, embargos on everything from medical equipment to medical teams that have flocked to Rafah's border in droves from all over the world.

When Obama spoke in Cairo on January 4, the closest major city was Gaza , where children flooded the border, imploring the US leader to exert some pressure on Israel to open the border and end the blockade that has imprisoned the entire population for nearly two years. Children held banners with slogans like, "a light of hope for Gaza children", and " Gaza children appeal for help". Sahar Abu Foul, a nine-year-old girl who attended the rally, said that the children in Gaza want Obama's help "to secure a life like all other children." But considering his rigorous schedule, Obama couldn't pencil in a visit to the border to address this young crowd. However, just before his arrival, Congress invested further money into fortifying the border area, allocating an addition 50 million dollars to secure the Rafah border, making Sobhi's crossing all the more unlikely.

So the days pass. I telephone Sobhi, who speaks with such maturity and courtesy on the phone, inquiring about my health, the health of my family, and asking that God will grant us lives of good health and other mercies. His medical charts say that he is overcoming his depression and simply wants to join his father in the fields again. He has uncomplicated aspirations and a seemingly simple request; an artificial leg. His father, soft-spoken and a bit shy seems to be resigned to the unfortunate possibility of his son not coming to the US after all. I continue to encourage him, but I myself also feel that this special and unusual exchange may have been too good to be true. Sobhi says that he hopes that he will be able to help with the olive harvest this year. But sometimes having hope in a place like Gaza becomes more of a liability than a lifeline.

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