

Remembering Eyad El-Sarraj: Palestine's Mental Health Pioneer and Human Rights Defender

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Sarraj founded and headed Gaza's Community Mental Health Program (GCMHP). He called its mission: "Healing the Spirit. Instilling Hope."

He said "(i)f you're not enjoying human rights, then you're definitely not enjoying sound mental health."

Friends and associates called him indefatigable. After Israel's 1967 occupation, his father and brother were arrested. They were brutally tortured and abused.

In the mid-1990s, he became Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizens' Rights Commissioner General. He took full advantage.

He denounced Israeli and complicit Palestinian Authority human rights abuses. Three times PA authorities arrested him. They imprisoned him.

He was isolated, beaten and tortured. He was punished for defending right over wrong. He refused to remain silent.

He was outspoken to the end.

Defending Palestinian human rights became his "major obsession." They're victims of Israeli state terror.

They endure daily humiliations. They're denied fundamental rights. They're unjustifiably arrested, imprisoned, and tortured.

Their homes are maliciously destroyed. Their land is stolen. They're ethnically cleansed to make way for exclusive Jewish development.

They're murdered in cold blood. They lost loved ones. They're longstanding victims of Israeli injustice.

Sarraj wanted Palestinian suffering ended. He served their mental health needs. He helped traumatized children and torture victims.

On December 17, he succumbed. He lost his long struggle with multiple myeloma (plasma cells cancer). He was 69.

He was a renown and respected psychiatrist. He pioneered mental health in Palestine. He was an important human rights defender.

During the First Intifada (1987 - 1993), he was appalled at how Israelis treated Palestinians. He did what he could to help.

He ignored imposed curfews. He paid no attention to other military orders. He went where he was needed. He made no attempt to avoid patrolling Israeli forces.

He defied occupation harshness. He managed best he could. He did so because it mattered.

He felt the same way throughout his professional career. He was determined to make a difference. He proved everyone can in some way.

He established refugee camp clinics. He developed training and crisis intervention programs. He began various other initiatives.

The [Palestinian Center for Human Rights](#) (PCHR) called him a “great national struggler.”

“He dedicated his life to defending human rights and democracy, supporting the civil society and pioneering mental health in Palestine.”

“His illness did not prevent him from performing his patriot duty and persistent work to heal the Palestinian fragmentation.”

“He successfully represented the Palestinian cause on international levels and became an example of a successful psychiatrist and a politically creative figure.”

PCHR remembered “his honest national efforts to defend the right of Palestinians to live in freedom and dignity.”

Thousands who got to know him understood. He gained international prominence. He did so by focusing on the devastating effects occupation harshness has on children.

In January 2009, he headlined a [New York Times](#) op-ed “A 14-year old’s question: Why?”

He discussed “a lovely girl of 14, a talented writer in English and Arabic...” Her name is Noor. She’s “my stepdaughter,” said Sarraj.

She asked tough questions. She looked forward to higher education in America. She was unsure it could happen.

During Cast Lead, “Israeli fighter bombers flattened her school.”

Her friend Christine was killed. So were many others, said Sarraj. Israel considers children fair game like adults.

It calls civilians justifiable military targets. Noor asked “why Israel would destroy her school. She asked why Palestinians don’t have air defenses,” and why Americans aren’t fair.

Sarraj said good ones aren’t in power. Noor asked why Arabs are impotent? Why don’t Russia and China help?

She’s “not alone in her pain,” said Sarraj. “Many children in Gaza are wetting their beds, unable to sleep, clinging to their mothers.”

Worst of all are severe longterm traumatic consequences, Sarraj explained. “Israel will eventually stop the war and we may be saved, but who will save Israel from itself,” he asked?

On December 30, 2008, Israel bombed GCMHP’s headquarters. It was heavily damaged. It was rebuilt. It resumed operating.

GCMHP’s [Nancy Murray](#) remembered Sarraj, saying:

For him, “human rights and mental health work went hand in hand.” He was Gaza’s first practicing psychiatrist. He began treating Palestinians in 1977.

“His courage, decency, independence of mind, and vision of a better world made him a beacon of moral conscience and hope for those Israelis seeking peace with Palestinians, and Palestinians struggling with both the occupation and their own ruinous political divisions.”

He “leaves behind a bereaved Palestine, a grieving family, and friends around the world who will miss him deeply.”

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh called him “a meeting point for all Palestinian people. (H)e was born and lived for them.”

UN special Middle East peace process coordinator Robert Serry called him “someone who persistently stood on the side of human rights, peace and justice.”

Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza director Issam Younis said he reflected “gentlemanly antagonism.” Failure to reconcile Palestinian differences “left his heart aching.”

He explained what it’s like living under occupation harshness, saying. “Among other things, it means:

- an identity number and permit to live as a resident which will be lost if one leaves the country for more than three months;
- a traveling document which specifies that the holder is of an undefined nationality;
- being called twice a year by intelligence for routine investigation and persuasion to work as an informer on ‘your brothers and sisters,’
- leaving your home in the refugee camp in Gaza at 3 am, going through road-blocks and checkpoints to do the work that others won’t, and returning home in the evening to collapse in bed for a few hours before getting up for the following day;
- losing respect from one’s own children when they see their father spat at and beaten before their own eyes; (and)

- seeing the (name of the) Prophet being spat on by Israeli settlers in Hebron.

We were exhausted, tormented and brutalized.”

Sarraj gained international respect and recognition. His awards include:

- the Physicians for Human Rights Award;
- the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders;
- the Olof Palme Prize for his “self-sacrificing and indefatigable struggle for common sense, reconciliation and peace between Palestine and Israel;” and
- the Juan Jose Lopez-Ibor Prize in Psychiatry.

He was born in Beir-al-Saba. Israel changed its name to Beersheva. He was four years old when his family was forced to flee.

It was during Israel’s so-called War of Independence. Palestinians were viciously targeted. Mass slaughter and ethnic cleansing followed.

Unspeakable crimes of war and against humanity were committed. They never stopped. They continue today.

World leaders able to make a difference turn a blind eye. Israel gets away with murder and much more. Sarraj struggled to change things. He’s an inspiration for others to continue his work.

He grew up in Gaza. At the time, Egypt controlled it. He studied medicine in Egypt. He continued at London's Institute of Psychiatry. He spent his entire professional life doing what he loved best.

He worked tirelessly for peace, human rights, justice, and victims of Israel's occupation. He did it because it matters.

In 1990, he founded GCMHP. Its administrator Husam El-Nounou said:

"Our commitment to Dr. Sarraj is to continue his message and his struggle for respect for human rights."

He's survived by his second wife, Nirmeen, their son Ali aged 7, and sons from his first marriage.

In 2010, he was "proud and happy to receive" the Olof Palme Prize, he said. Palestine's "real heroes are the victims of violence, torture and war," he explained.

"This prize gives me hope and encourages me to continue to fight to defend those rights have been abused, and to work for justice and peace."

He devoted his life to achieving them. He's gone to his just reward. He leaves a huge void to fill. Hopefully others are up to the challenge. His struggle for human rights, justice and peace continues.

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