

Thousands at Congress Affirm Palestinian Right To Return

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Global Research, December 22, 2008

IAC 18 December 2008

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Law and Justice](#)

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More than 5,000 delegates filled the hall to overflowing at the Arab International Congress for the Right of Return, held in Damascus, Syria, on Nov. 23 and 24. Delegates came from 54 countries.

The gathering was a strong demonstration of support for the struggle of the Palestinian people and their historic demands.

The two-day event was aimed at establishing the Right To Return of Palestinian refugees, which was defined as a firm Palestinian and Arab principle that is not subject to bargaining, concessions or trade-offs and cannot lapse with the passage of time.

A ringing declaration on the Right To Return, adopted at the final plenary session of the giant assembly, confirmed once again that this right is considered inalienable and at the core of the Palestinian cause. It condemned the expulsion of the Palestinian people as a crime of ethnic cleansing and a crime against humanity. It also called for resistance to all “population exchange” and “transfer” initiatives and settlements, as well as to the racist wall that has been built by the Israeli state to change the demographic and geographic identity of Palestine.

The congress hailed the continuing “culture of resistance” because it is “the shortest way to achieve the return of Palestinians to their homes” and called for protecting and fortifying this right at the Islamic, national and international levels.

The congress was held in line with a year of activities to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Nakba (catastrophe), the Arabic term for the Zionist usurpation of Palestine in 1948.

Organizers of the event explained that the 5,000 delegates came from a widely inclusive range of organizations, associations, political parties and unions. There were Palestinian, Arab, Islamic and international personalities of all persuasions. Palestinian communities from all parts of the world were represented.

Solidarity with Gaza, Jerusalem and prisoners-

Almost every speaker at the two-day gathering also condemned the continuing Zionist siege of 1.5 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip as a crime against humanity and a crime of genocide. Speakers and the congress declaration noted that the siege, now in its second year, has isolated Gaza from the entire world and deprived the population of the vital necessities of life.

The congress called for “immediate Egyptian steps to open the Rafah Crossing, the only opening of the Gaza Strip to the outside world and their only remaining lifeline. They must allow the Gaza Strip to import the necessities of life, transportation and basic services such as water, electricity, fuel and medicine. ... The complicity of the Egyptian government does not represent the true nationalist and patriotic will of the Egyptian people.”

Many speakers emphasized the need to break the oppressive siege imposed on the Gaza Strip by all means and methods. Solidarity initiatives were highlighted. These included the journeys to Gaza by the boats “Hope” and “Dignity,” which brought aid in defiance of an Israeli blockade.

Other declarations and speakers condemned Israel’s efforts to eradicate the Palestinian identity of Jerusalem through continuing expulsions and the destruction of homes, as well as its attempts to isolate the indigenous Jerusalemite population from the rest of Palestine and restrict their movement by building walls, fences and settlements.

The most honored guests at the gathering were Palestinian prisoners who had served decades in Israeli prisons. Awards, waves of cheers and revolutionary chants applauded their determination, perseverance and heroic steadfastness.

The congress also sent a strong message of solidarity to the “12,000 male and female prisoners still held in Zionist prisons who continue to face abuse, torture and denial of their most basic rights.” It denounced the Israeli kidnapping of the great bulk of parliamentarians democratically elected by the Palestinian people, many of whom are now held in prison.

Other declarations focused on Sudan and Lebanon. The declaration on Sudan condemned the Zionist role in the plots to dismember Sudan and undermine its national unity and its Arab, African and Islamic identity. It opposed all forms of colonial intervention, dubious internationalization and provocative initiatives. The declaration on Lebanon saluted the resistance in Lebanon and its great victory over the Israeli invasion of 2006.

U.S. harassment of delegates-

It is hardly surprising that a meeting full of such revolutionary determination received no coverage or attention in the Western corporate media. Nor is it too unexpected that efforts to block attendance to the conference might come in many different forms.

Cynthia McKinney was kept from boarding a flight to the congress in what she termed a “misunderstanding” at the Atlanta airport. McKinney, this year’s Green Party presidential candidate and a former six-term member of Congress, released a press statement containing the speech she had prepared for the conference. It commemorated the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and condemned the denial of the Right of Return to Palestinians as a violation of the Universal Declaration.

[Flounders also had great difficulty boarding a flight from New York to attend the International Right To Return conference. Almost three hours of technical problems, sudden, inexplicable “visa problems,” and three extra security checks held up her boarding until the final minute before the gates were to close.—]

A statement from the International Action Center, based in New York, expressed support for the fundamental and collective right of all Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and

to self-determination as well as political, economic and civil equality. It also condemned the siege of Gaza.

The focus of the IAC statement was on U.S. support for Israel's crimes: "Coming from the U.S. it is important for us to say that U.S. imperialism is the greatest roadblock to the Palestinian Right to Return and the greatest impediment to any form of peace or justice in the entire region.

"Without the constant infusion of billions of dollars in arms and aid the Zionist state of Israel could not exist one day. U.S. aid averages more than \$15 million a day, every day for the last 60 years. Under both Republican and Democratic Party presidents Israel is always the largest recipient of U.S. aid in the world every year. ... Why? Because Israel is carrying out U.S. policy in the region. U.S. corporate power fully intends Israel to exist as a garrison state and a continuing source of instability in the region....

"Over the past six decades the struggle of the Palestinian people has inspired hundreds of millions of people worldwide because of its dynamism and revolutionary fervor." Flounders, co-director of the International Action Center, was an invited guest at the Arab International Congress for the Right of Return. The congress resolutions and reports, as well as Cynthia McKinney's statement and the full IAC statement, will be available at iacenter.org.

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