



## OBITUARY



### EYAD EL-SARRAJ

APRIL 27, 1944 – DECEMBER 17, 2013

#### PROF UNAIZA NIAZ (MD, DPM, FRCPSych)

Consultant Psychiatrist & Psychotherapist, Honorary Member, The World Psychiatric Association, Chair, Section on WMH, The World Psychiatric Association, Distinguish International Member American Psychiatric Association, Advisory Board Member, International Association of Women's Mental Health, Member of International Resource Group for the GCMH

Eyad was born on 27 April 1944, to a Palestinian Arab Muslim family in Beersheba, a city currently in Southern Israel. His family arrived in the Gaza Strip as refugees in 1948 and never returned home. In the 1970s he studied medicine at the University of Alexandria in Egypt. He graduated with a Postgraduate degree from the Institute of Psychiatry & the King's College, London. Eyad had tremendous resilience, an astute judgment, charisma, sharp mind and crisp humor; indeed a rare combination of attributes that his friends and foes both admired.

His only mission in life was to get his nation liberated from the unjust occupation. His face used to light up when he talked of his beautiful Gaza with its mesmerizing beaches. His resentment and anger towards the Israeli atrocities to the occupied Palestinian territories was a painful reality that obviously fueled his passion to do something for his nation.

Eyad pioneered mental health care in Gaza and became an internationally recognized human rights advocate, criticizing both Israeli and Palestinian authorities. He founded the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP) in 1990. Helping people move beyond their personal and collective trauma was his life's mission. Human rights and mental health went hand in hand for him. He kept the traumatized and wounded country alive in spite of his chronic, debilitating Multiple Myeloma.

He rose to international prominence during the first Palestinian uprising against Israeli military occupation in Gaza in the late 1980s. Eyad's focus on the traumatic effects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on children was narrated in the New York Times in 2009. He wrote:

"Many children in Gaza are wetting their beds, unable to sleep, clinging to their mothers. Worse are the long-term consequences of this severe trauma. Palestinian children in the first intifada 20 years ago threw stones at Israeli tanks trying to extract freedom from Israeli military occupation. Some of those children grew up to become suicide bombers in the second intifada 10 years later."


He wrote a personal reflection in 1997 about "Why We Have Become Suicide Bombers: Understanding Palestinian

Terror" in which he delineated several factors including living "under Israeli occupation." Among other things, he wrote, "it means travel restrictions, having an undefined nationality, being asked to spy on your family, dealing with checkpoints, being belittled, being exhausted, tormented and brutalized and seeing our prophet being humiliated".

Amongst his innumerable important positions, he was a consultant to the Palestinian delegation at the Camp David 2000 Summit. He was also a recipient of the Physicians for Human Rights Awards. He became an internationally recognized human rights advocate, concerned about the mental health damage caused by political oppression and challenged both Israeli and Palestinian abuse. He was also jailed at various times by both Israel and by Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority. In the Palestinian elections of 2006, he headed the Wa'ad list of candidates, also known as the National Coalition for Justice and Democracy. He also headed a group of Palestinian and Israeli academics working towards a peace agreement. Dr. Sarraj's Gaza City home was familiar to foreign diplomats, researchers and journalists seeking his opinions.

In June 2009 Dr El-Sarraj appeared before the United Nation (UN) fact-finding mission into Operation Cast Lead. He appeared as a witness on behalf of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, and he reported that 20% of the children in Gaza suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorders. His evidence is quoted in the final report, known as the Goldstone Report.

He explained what it meant to live under Israeli occupation. "We simply became the slaves of our enemy. We are building their homes on our villages, and we clean their streets. Do you know what it does to you when you have to be the slave of your enemy in order to survive? ... Do you know what it means for a child to see his father spat at and beaten before his eyes by an Israeli soldier? Nobody knows what happened to our children. We don't know ourselves except we observe that they lose respect for their fathers. So they, our children, the children of the stone as they became known, tried the Intifada - the Uprising. Seven long years our children were throwing stones and being killed daily. Nearly all our young men were arrested, the majority was tortured. All had to confess. The result was



every one suspected that all people were spies. So, we were exhausted, tormented and brutalized. What else could we do to return to our home? We had almost forgotten that and all what we wanted was to be left alone.”

He was a prolific writer who wrote innumerable articles in both professional journals and the lay press. He has done seminal work on trauma in children & adolescents, and contributed numerous chapters in different books in psychiatry.

Speaking at Eyad Sarraj’s funeral in Gaza, Ismail Haniya, the prime minister of the Hamas government, described him as “a meeting point for all Palestinian people,” adding, “He is going to be missed by Palestine and Gaza because he was born and lived for them”. Rami Hamdallah, the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority government, said Dr. Sarraj’s achievements would remain as “a beacon for the continuation of the march” of the Palestinian people toward an independent state.

Dr. Eyad el Sarraj leaves behind a bereaved Palestine, a grieving family and friends around the world who will miss him deeply. May Allah rest his soul in peace.

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