

# Sowing the Seeds of Resistance

## Keynote Address by Dr Helen McCue AM

Sowing the Seeds: More than numbers

Muslim Women Australia

[www.mwa.org.au](http://www.mwa.org.au)

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It is an honour to be asked to launch the [Seeds of Resistance Report](#), an insightful and inspiring document.

I acknowledge that I am on the lands of the Gundungurra people. And I pay my respects to all elders and leaders both past, present and emerging. This land was stolen and never ceded.

Every morning since October 7<sup>th</sup> last year I wake up fearful that something terrible has happened in Gaza as I slept. And I find each day that my fears and anxiety are based on reality. One morning this week I learnt that 15 babies had died from malnutrition, starved of their mother's milk or because milk supplements are not available as Israel blocks delivery of food and medicines. Yesterday the Israelis blocked multiple trucks of necessary aid from the WF program. I wake to the news that a mother, who tried for 11 years to have a child, lost her husband and her twin babies Wissam and Naeim in a bombing in Rafah, designated a safe zone by the Israeli military. I learn that more people are killed by Israeli tank and sniper fire as they wait for the tiny amount of food allowed into Gaza.

But I am not alone with this emotional pain as this important [report](#) shows. Muslims, Arabs and other non-Muslim women, men and many young people here and across the world are protesting in their millions over catastrophic situation in Gaza, the slaughter, the killing of at least 3,000 children and the injury and maiming of over 70,000 people. The UN has projected the loss of more than 60,000 people from starvation and communicative diseases. People are mourning and are outraged at the catastrophic failure of health care services, and the complete destruction of Gaza's hospitals, schools, mosques, administrative infrastructure, sewerage facilities, universities and internationally renowned archaeological sites by a brutal, vicious, inhumane Israeli military. But as this [report](#) shows it is the silence of colleagues, the abuse from strangers, the legal threats for speaking out, the real loss of jobs and the complicity and silence of politicians that is so devastating and heartbreaking.

Is this Australia? Sadly it is.

Where is our common humanity? Silent is an act of complicity; complicity in what the International Court of Justice says is a high probability of genocide by the Israeli military, complicity in what the International Criminal Court accuses Israel of, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Silence in the face of genocide and war crimes is complicity. Why is the Australia Government so silent with no comment on the ICJs findings, why did the government "pause" aid to UNRWA when to date no evidence of wrongdoing has been

provided by Israel. Why, when so many doctors are being murdered and detained, is the AMA silent and when doctors speaking out, they are reported to the Medical Board. Why are the churches silent when the Pope himself called Israelis terrorists? Where are the voices of civil society, the women's organisations, the medical and church organisations.?? Australian Muslims and Arabs and supporters of Palestine are met with silence and worse as this [report](#) shows.

And there is silence too about the situation in the Occupied West Bank that has been so little covered by mainstream media where Israel continues to arm settlers, expand settlements, confiscate lands, take natural resources, and install settlers in Palestinian population areas in total violation of its international obligations. And this violation has only accelerated since October last year. In the past nearly five months over 400 Palestinians have been killed, among them 102 children, 4,600 have been injured and thousands detained. There has also been extensive damage to people's homes and roads, in particular in the refugees camps.

Not only is Israel conducting mass killings of desperate Palestinians and using forced starvation as weapon of war, they are also using torture and illegal detention of hundreds of men and women and girls who have been arbitrarily detained in Gaza and the West Bank since October 7<sup>th</sup>. Among these detainees are doctors and other health workers, journalists and human rights workers.

Reporting on February 19 this year UN Experts and Special Rapporteurs Reem Alsalem and Francesca Albanese stated that credible accusations have emerged “ . . .that Palestinian women and girls in detention have been subjected to multiple forms of sexual assault, such as being stripped naked and searched by male Israeli army officers. At least two female detainees were reportedly raped while others were threatened with rape and sexual violence”. They also noted that photos of female detainees in degrading circumstances were reportedly taken by the Israeli soldiers and uploaded online. They expressed concern that an unknown number of Palestinian women and children, including girls, have reportedly gone missing after contact with the Israeli army in Gaza. “There are disturbing reports of at least one female infant being forcibly transferred by the Israeli army into Israel, and of children being separated from their parents, whose whereabouts remain unknown”. There are an estimated 19,000 Gazan orphans.

There have also been serious reports of women raped by Hamas and other military forces on October 7<sup>th</sup> and although reported as such by the UN on Tuesday this week investigators have been denied access to the alleged victims. And while no one can condone the brutal murders, and abductions by Hamas on Oct 7 there is always a context.

Palestinians have continued for nearly eight decades since 1948, to resist the Israeli occupation. There have been various peace talks and talk of a Palestinian state while Israel keep taking more Palestinian land. There are now around 800,000 settlers on Palestinian land in violation of international law and numerous UN resolutions. These lands have been taken violently and broken up into small non-contiguous enclaves.

In 2007 after the Oslo Accords of 1993 that resulted in the formation of the Palestinian

National Authority and guaranteed Palestinians some very limited authority in Gaza and the West Bank, elections were held under US supervision and Hamas won these democratic elections in Gaza. Immediately the US and Israel resisted this democratic result and Gaza was put under a siege that has lasted to today. Food was restricted to a limited caloric intake and since the Gaza siege of 2007 children have become smaller and thinner. Critical exports and essential goods, movement of people for work, movement of people for medical care were seriously curtailed. Gaza was surrounded on three sides by the Israeli military, and they controlled the sea as well stopping fishing a much used source of food and nutrition. Gazans were trapped inside an "open air prison", denied basic human rights, deprived of sufficient food from Israel for their children to grow properly, economic development was deprived, access to advanced medical care was denied. This vicious, inhuman control and destruction of another people's lives is clearly an act of genocide, of apartheid, and of multiple war crimes. This is the context of the October 7<sup>th</sup> assault.

My relationship with Palestinians first started in August 1982. Israel had invaded Lebanon on June 6<sup>th</sup> of that year and at the time I was a nurse consultant with the Middle East section of the World Health Organisation, based in Alexandria Egypt. I was asked to go to the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon on secondment with UNRWA the UN relief agency for Palestinians. Following the Sabra Shatila Palestinian camp massacre on the 16 and 17 of September of that year by Lebanese Christian forces overseen and aided by the Israeli military, when over 3,000 old men, women and children, I resigned from the WHO and went as a volunteer nurse in Gaza Hospital in that camp.

It was here that I first met Dr Olfat Mahmoud, my dear friend and mentor who sadly passed away last year. I nursed in the camp hospital for several months and during this time worked with Olfat and spent time with her and her family in Bourj el Barajneh camp. Living and sleeping there and sharing so many moments of family joy and suffering greatly strengthened my understanding of the Palestinian struggle. Olfat and I became very close, and she taught me many things about Palestinian camp life. She visited Australia numerous times advocating for her people. She first visited the MWA in 1985 and several times after that. My own relationship with the MWA, goes back four decades and has shaped and strongly influenced my insights and understandings of the difficulties but also the dignity and resilience of Muslim women in Australia.

I stayed in Beirut for about six months and returned to Australia where in January 1984 with the help of the then President of the ACTU Cliff Dolan APHEDA now known as Union Aid Abroad APHEDA was established. Since then, these past 40 years APHEDA has had projects worldwide but in Lebanon we work in the camps with the Palestinian Women's Humanitarian Organisation supporting women and children. In the OPT we have continued to work with local partners based in Ramallah since 1987. The MA'AN's development centre is our key partner, and they work across the OPT where several of their projects are with women. They also work in Gaza where presently, in spite of great personal and material losses and loss of family members, they continue to assist with humanitarian work there.

This important [report](#) that I am privileged to launch inspires all of us to learn from Palestinian women, men and children who love and support one another, who express their resistance daily with great dignity and immense compassion and faith that remains in spite

of the apartheid, the genocide, the horrific loss of life and injury and inhumane suffering they are enduring. Australian Muslim and Arab women are also living with faith, dignity and resilience as this [report](#) details in spite of the silencing, the Islamophobic abuse, the discrimination and harassment they have been subjected to and the failure of colleagues, government officials, the media, to recognise their pain and suffering.

It is my privilege to launch this important and insightful [report](#) and I urge all of you to read it fully.